



The Queer Lonely Diaries

**Friendship as a way of life ♡ Community care ♡
Towards the abolition horizon**

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Friendship as a way of life * Community care * Towards the abolition horizon

A zine by A.N.

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This is a free zine. Thank you so much for reading it. Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in *Braiding Sweetgrass* that in a gift economy, “whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again”. If anything you read here moves you, feel free to pass it on.

These essays deal with the facts of my life, but names, identifying details and some locations have been changed.

Cover art by Peppermintlines (IG: @peppermintlines)

This zine is set in Klinik Slab Book (print version) and Klinik Slab Medium (web version), except for titles and footnotes which are set in Dotties Chocolate Medium. Both are Lost Type Co-Op fonts, a Pay-What-You-Want foundry “dedicated to the idea that quality fonts should be made available to anyone who wants to create an individual piece of characterful design.”

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To all my friends.

To the queer artists, writers and thinkers whose work has helped me become.

To my Pleasure Activism group, who made this zine possible, and to adrienne
maree brown for writing the book that brought us together.

But the second history of the body?

The second history is love's inscription.

Some inscription we wear like dreams—fragments of a life unthetered from this world, messages from a future reflected to us like light off broken shards. A woman undresses in this dream-light, embraces you, and your body rises with hers to become unmarked.

Some inscriptions are utterances, battles. Someone fought the police long ago. This, too—this street fight—is a kind of love...

Someone said, "[O]ne Molotov cocktail was thrown and we were ramming the door of the Stonewall bar with an uprooted parking meter. So they were ready to come out shooting that night. Finally the Tactical Police Forced showed up after 45 minutes. A lot of people forget that for 45 minutes we had them trapped in there" ("I'm glad I Was in the Stonewall Riot," Sylvia Rivera, interviewed by Leslie Feinberg, Worker's World, July 2, 1998).

I'm not saying this battle was fought for you. History is not that linear. And yet, because of it, and many others like it, now you inhabit your own skin.

—Jordy Rosenberg
Confessions of the Fox

1. The Queer Lonely Diaries

I've been turning the title "the queer lonely diaries" around in my mind for the better part of two years. I knew I wanted to write about my loneliness, about how it's been shaped by social and political structures, but it took me a long time to be able to imagine what shape this kind of writing could take. Whatever I imagined has shifted over the past few years; whatever this is going to become now will inevitably be different than if I'd written it before. I think this instability, this responsiveness to the here and now, is important enough to highlight.

I first said these words out loud to my friend Adam in his kitchen in New Orleans. We were making dinner together, a sweet potato and chickpea curry; I complimented his knife skills and he joked about being my sous-chef. I was telling him I wanted it to be a blog, maybe, but that I felt we were past the heydays of blogging as a form of community building. In the mid-2000s it had been easy to make friends through the back-and-forth of comments—that was how our own friendship had started—but I couldn't imagine starting a blog now without feeling like I was pouring my heart out into the void. I thought I'd soon get discouraged. I felt, without irony, that it would be too lonely.

My heart was very tender on that trip, very chafed from rubbing for so long against something I couldn't quite name. I'd been feeling, to borrow an image from Madeleine L'Engle's *A Ring of Endless Light*, "full to the brim of very me". I couldn't yet see a way out of my too-confining individuality, but during those days I spent with Adam I already knew that being in the world, really being in the world, would somehow be a part of it. That week I kept waking up too early because of jet lag. I'd make a cup of coffee and chicory and listen to *Making Gay History* on Adam's front porch until he got up. I read parts of his copy of *The Body Keeps the Score*. I spent a day wandering the streets of New Orleans on my own while he was at work. We saw alligators at Jean Lafitte National Park and one lone pelican on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain. We went to see *Captain Marvel* together. We sat on his back porch in the evenings, watching the bats come out at twilight. We talked a lot. It all helped.

I'm interested in exploring the politics of queer loneliness, which is another way of saying I'm interested in making sense of the contours of my own loneliness— in connecting it to what exists outside myself. I'm trying to figure out how to be a person, how to be in the world, how a sustaining relationality might fit into my life

when my life began with so much harm. I've been holding Foucault's "Friendship as a Way of Life" close to my heart, turning to it as a guiding light. I want to put my raw queer heart out there into the world and—what? I'm not quite sure how this sentence might end, but I think that's part of what I'm investigating here. I want to give myself permission to be tentative and to do so out loud, to do so in public. (Maybe—right now, as I write this first draft, I don't yet know how these words might make their way into the world. In some ways that's what's making it possible for me to write them at all.) I guess I'm interested in writing as a way to connect, but I'm still working out what I mean by that.

Whatever I write is going to be personal, but I'm less interested in the individuality of my loneliness than in its social and political dimension, and in the ways it's been shaped by my positionality as a white queer cis femme. I want to pry it away from the realm of the unsayable, and I think one way of doing that is to join the dots that connect it to the wider world. There's a lot of shame in admitting to loneliness, and also a risk you'll be misconstrued. When I talk about loneliness, I worry I'll be perceived as too starved for connection to get to have a say when any is offered to me: to get to be discerning, to get to refuse forms of relationality that might not serve me well without it having to mean I'm closing myself off. To get to have boundaries, I guess. It's messy terrain; I'm trying to wade through that, too.

I've been drawn to other writing on this subject, to pieces of work I felt I could perhaps think with. Recently I came across *The Lonely Letters* by Ashon T. Crawley, and as I read it I felt my imaginative possibilities widen. It's a beautiful book, and it's given me so much. Reading it made it possible for me to conceive of this piece of writing, of whatever this is going to become. I was so moved by the way Crawley expresses his desire not to give up on sociality or retreat from the world, but to find life and sustenance in connections while freeing them from coercion. His framing offered me a way forward. Lately I've been trying to make space for a certain tension between not wanting to be too suspicious of my desire for sociality and for company—even as I subject them to a kind of sociological investigation—and wondering whether perhaps I'm not suspicious enough. I wonder if this is a form of shame too.

Do you ever feel you can tell when a book is going to be really important to you before you even start it? That's happened to me a few times. I was moved by the idea of *The Lonely Letters* before I even picked it up. I was even moved by the back cover

blurb, which says that “*The Lonely Letters* gestures towards understanding the capacity for what we study to work on us, to transform us, and to change how we inhabit the world”. In the introduction, titled *and*, Crawley poses the following question: “Can one consider loneliness to not just be, or to not primarily be, an experience of the individual but of the social world?” He also says,

But it would be unsatisfying, I think, to write a bunch of letters about the personal, private, individual experience of loneliness and aloneness and desires for romantic love. Though I do not shy away from this being a very real factor that animates this autobiography of loneliness, this mythopoetics approaching but shying away from “what really happened”, the letters are about so much more. I found that the more these worked on me, came to me, spoke to me and with and through me—these voices, these friends, these tales—the more I found the narrative, if there is one, to be about the severance from community. They are about the complexity of thought and movements and spirit that emerges from how it is to feel abandoned by communities of care and concern, about being left behind by churches and institutions that were once integral to life and love.

And, perhaps most movingly of all:

What I *do* know is that it’s not an erotic life, an intimate relational life, that has sustained my ability to remain, to have joy, to have peace of mind. Or, really, the intimacy that has sustained me isn’t normative at all, it’s a queer intimacy, the intimacy of close sitting and held breath, of sharing thoughts and ideas and laughter.

Reading these words has made so much possible for me. My becoming queer has been informed both by my life experiences and by my reading: by that coming to inhabit the world differently through reading, that process of being transformed by other people’s words, that the back cover blurb of *The Lonely Letters* talks about. I have been thus transformed; I have felt, deeply, the written word’s shaping of my sense of possibility. It’s been so expansive, so enriching, that I feel on the verge of tears when I stop to think about it. I wanted to find a way to honour that. And so in some ways

that's also what I'm writing about here: is reading a form of sociality, of being in the company of others, that could nourish my heart?

Crawley also writes, "Everything said, everything written, is in search of a connection". I've felt this deeply. But what does it mean to say I'm lonely and that I'm writing to connect? What does it mean to put my raw queer heart out there into the world? And when I put this in the form of a question, is it because I'm really unsure, or am I trying to hide from the vulnerability of the declarative?

Some years ago, when I was at my parents' house for Christmas, I read Lewis Hyde's *The Gift* for the first time. Much like they are for so many other queers, the holidays are a fraught time for me, a time that endangers my heart. It makes me all the more grateful for anything I stumble upon around this time that brings me meaning or relief. That Christmas, my last before becoming queer, I was immensely moved by Hyde's chapter on Walt Whitman. He writes in depth about exactly this: Whitman's loneliness and his deep longing for connection through writing. He also writes about the delicate balancing act involved in offering this longing up to the world with enough lightness that it doesn't burden its recipients. Instead it becomes a shared load, or perhaps not even a load but a reminder of our common humanity. I reread that chapter recently, but I couldn't find the phrase I thought I remembered having moved me the most. It was something along the lines of, "to offer it up with no expectation or demand". I think what I was misremembering was this, which I suppose is close enough:

Whitman manages that poise, required to both art and love, which offers the gift without insisting. He may not have found the love he wanted in life, but it would be wrong to consign his appetites entirely to personal circumstances. Who among us has been sufficiently loved, whose heart has been fully realised in the returning gaze of the beloved?

Writing makes possible a kind of loose and fleeting sociality I've come to believe I need for my heart to be nourished. I think perhaps I need it every bit as much as I need the ongoing intimacy of individual love, the kind of love our dominant discursive frameworks are more likely to recognise.

In a *New Enquiry* conversation with Elleza Kelley, Ashon T. Crawley also touches on this:

It was important for me to think about love letters and the way, in general, responses are not required and certainly cannot and should not be coerced, because that is the antithesis of love. In this way, love is the reckless abandonment of writing that hopes for but does not require response; love is a sense for solicitation towards reply, a desire to be in ongoing conversation.

I love the phrase “a sense for solicitation towards reply”. Learning to dwell in this openness, to stay with and tolerate this vulnerability without pushing myself beyond what I can endure, has been one of the greatest tasks of my life.

It’s nearly summer now, and the days are long. A few days ago I woke up just before 6am and sat outside reading Virginia Woolf’s diaries in the early morning light. It was grief that woke me up, grief about being estranged from one of my beloveds. But on this particular morning I was able to ground myself by attending to the grass, the bird chirping all around me, the fresh summery early morning light. The world felt brand new. I interrupted what could have been another anguished sleepless dawn tossing and turning in bed with a moment of deliberate joy. Who knew I was able to do that? I suppose in a way I did know, but this is what the somatics writers I’ve been reading call the difference between insight and embodied knowledge. One year ago an early morning like this wasn’t exactly unimaginable, but it was still beyond my reach.

I took a photo with my phone—my Cookie Monster pajamas pants, Woolf’s *Selected Diaries*, the beautiful light. I felt another stab of grief. Then I wrote a brief paragraph about the experience and sent it out into the world, into a queer group chat I joined at the start of the pandemic. A few minutes later, a fellow queer person I didn’t know sent me the song “Virginia Woolf” by the Indigo Girls, whose lyrics made me tear up: “And here’s a young girl / on a kind of a telephone line through time / And the voice at the other end comes like a long lost friend”. It was a small but perfect encapsulation of the kind of queer sociality I long for: to share of myself and be met with human warmth and generosity, in a way that’s fleeting but still means something. To move and to be moved. This brief exchange allowed me to escape the cage of my grief. It allowed me to be enlarged rather than diminished by my own smallness, by the passing nature of everything I feel. It made space for beauty and for joy.

In the first few weeks of the pandemic I also read *What is the Grass?*, Mark Doty's new book on Walt Whitman. The book builds up to a closing chapter celebrating the miraculous humanity, the sheer beauty, of what Whitman achieves in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry". Doty marvels, and invites us to marvel, at Whitman's slow build-up to sections seven and eight of the poem, to what Doty calls its "[bending of] the time-space in which it resides"—to the feeling, all too real, of being touched across space and time:

Closer yet I approach you,
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in advance,
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.

Who was to know what should come home to me?
Who knows but I am enjoying this?
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?
(...)
We understand then do we not?
What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not?

Reading this in my kitchen on another mid-pandemic early morning, 128 years after Walt Whitman's death, I felt it. I felt it in an embodied way, deep in my bones: I felt what was "promis'd without mentioning" coming to pass. I felt time and space fall to the side, the contours of my self bursting open, the world pouring in through my permeability. I felt this long-dead queer forefather "considering long and seriously of me". I felt the deep joy of being one of "others who look back on me because I look'd forward to them".

Whitman asks, "What is it then between us? / What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?". I think it's moments like the one I had in my kitchen. It's the opportunity to see beyond what Adrienne Rich calls (in another poem that undoes me) our "myths of separation". It's the stuff of life, a joy as meaningful as any

of my most treasured memories of individual love and care. This feeling of being so deeply touched, so held by history, is one of the things that have been keeping me going. Queer history is central to these new forms of heart-nourishment I'm discovering, to this way of having my emotional life sustained by experiences that go beyond one-to-one relationships but don't require me to give them up.

I've spent the better part of the morning when I'm first drafting this paragraph trying to find a historical anecdote I remember reading years ago. I came across it during a period when I was perhaps at my loneliest, in (I think) *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. In an apt metaphor for the fragility of the queer archive, I haven't been able to find it again: no amount of flipping through the book, using the index, or trying various keywords in Google Books' "search inside" box has helped. But I still want to tell you what I remember: it was the story of a woman somewhere in America in the first few decades of the 20th century, who was desperate to find a bar where she could meet other lesbians. She didn't know anyone she could turn to and ask, but somehow she figured out that gay bars would sometimes be listed in the phone book but not the yellow pages—or perhaps it was the other way around? Either way, she spent hours comparing the two, writing down the addresses of any promising places, and then driving past them to see whether or not they actually were gay bars.

I was so moved by her persistence, her resourcefulness, her determined act of hope. It resonates even now, in this era of search engines, when we can type in our preferred identity terms and find visible online queer spaces, but when it's nevertheless not always easy to find our way to the beloved communities our hearts long for. I felt, I don't know, less of a sense of impossibility. I felt jolted out of my despair. This long gone queer woman across space and time had tried to find community with such resourcefulness and against such odds that I felt that I, too, had to at least try.

(Another memory from around the same time: writing a journal entry that simply said, "Today, in my loneliness, I googled the phrase 'beloved community'".)

In *The Politics of Trauma*, Staci K. Haines makes the following point about the process of healing attachment wounds:

Attachment theory underscores that our bonds and connections with one another are central to our development through many stages of life. In most cases, when

this bond is disrupted, there are healing approaches to help mend and reestablish positive or secure attachment.

I'd also like to challenge this work to look further—to the lack of dignified connection and belonging offered to many communities by the broader social norms. Attachment is not just to our primary caregivers or our family and children—while it is key there. We also need to belong within our communities. Our communities need to belong to the broader social fabric. There is a broader circle of belonging that also affects attachment, a sense of security, and real choices for connection and interdependence.

I felt something inside me shift when I read this, something fall into place. It helped me make sense of why I, who carry such deep wounds around mothering, have experienced attachment healing over the past few years, even though I have also suffered profound interpersonal losses. I think it has to do with finding my lineage, my queer foremothers: with first reading Joan Nestle, Amber Hollibaugh, Dorothy Alison, Minnie Bruce Pratt; with hearing Joyce Hunter talk about loneliness in *Making Gay History*; with feeling a profound sense of homecoming, of the world sharpening into focus at long last. It has to do with finding out about the Lesbian Herstory Archives; with reading Joan Nestle's founding statement, "If you have the courage to touch another woman, you are a famous lesbian". I felt, in Wendy Moffat's articulation, that "these generative, intergenerational encounters were transformative rather than strictly reproductive": they enabled me to become.

At the start of all this, when I was journaling consistently, I often thought that I was creating an archive of myself that I'd maybe like to donate to the Lesbian Herstory Archives—that I was contributing an entry to the incomplete historical record of queer lives. It would be a gesture towards a future I know might not exist. Climate crisis is of course a huge part of this, but even apart from that I've long since tried to sit with the knowledge that human life, human history and culture, everything we've been and felt and created, will one day fade from existence. And yet, to cite José Esteban Muñoz, this gesturing towards the future makes the present more bearable. It gives me the chance to, like Whitman, "consider long and deeply" of the queer generations that might come, and to feel deeply held by the knowledge that I was perhaps imagined by the queers elders that have passed. Or perhaps I'm part of

the queer horizon they could not yet quite imagine, just like I can't quite imagine what might one day come. Muñoz again: "Queerness is not here, but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality".

I find this deeply sustaining. But even then, there's a knot of shame in this I have to pause to untie. I find myself hesitating, wanting to say I've read the critiques of this longing for historical connection and belonging. I find that I'm bracing myself for accusations of queer exceptionalism, of naïve futurity. It's hard to separate what I ought to pay mind to from the kind of shame that doesn't serve me well, the kind of fear I've grown weary of. The climate crisis does complicate the picture enormously, but I don't want to take refuge in nihilism. *Joyful Militancy* makes a striking point about how those of us who are drawn to radical politics and spaces can sometimes take refuge in cynicism, in being in the know, because that's perceived as the more sophisticated stance. This tendency, bergman and Montgomery argue, can be deeply corrosive, though radicals are of course not alone in using cynicism as a form of defense. I'm not impervious to it; I want to acknowledge the critiques, and I guess therefore make it clear that I am indeed in the know. But I'm also very much coming at this from the position of wanting connection and belonging, of wanting to find histories and voices and communities that will help mend my heart. There's no hiding from the vulnerability of that.

John D'Emilio writes, in "Capitalism and Gay Identity":

In this respect gay men and lesbians [sic] are well situated to play a special role. Already excluded from families as most of us are, we have had to create, for our survival, networks of support that do not depend on the bonds of blood or on the license of the state, but that are freely chosen and nurtured. The building of an 'affectional community' must be as much a part of our political movements as are campaigns for civil rights. In this way we might prefigure the shape of personal relationships in a society grounded in equality and justice rather than exploitation and oppression, a society where autonomy and security do not preclude each other but coexist.

carla bergman and Nick Montgomery also say In *Joyful Militancy*:

Reviving legacies of struggle can be a source of dignity and inspiration amid forces that seem implacable. In this sense, transformation is not about the modern vision of shucking off traditions and escaping the past. History can also help us tune into the ongoingness of antagonisms that Empire has attempted to relegate to the past. It can help us see and feel the ways that Empire's institutions have been resisted since their inception.

Ashon T. Crawley again:

I want to honour the traditions from which I emerge by attempting a life of joy that is not about my personal, private, individuated experience of it but a life of joy that emerges from within as communal, improvisational practice, a joy that could only be had for *me* when shared with others, when common, when mundane and ordinary.

And back to Muñoz, who always helps me move away from shame:

But while antiutopians might understand themselves as critical in the rejection of hope, they would, in the rush to denounce it, miss the point that hope is spawned of a critical investment in Utopia that is nothing like naïve but, instead, profoundly resistant to the stultifying temporal logic of a broken-down present

In their company, I feel less alone in these longings. I feel less ashamed. I feel I'm in good company in finding that reading, writing, studying history and joining social movements are essential parts of the kind of sociality and belonging I yearn for. I'm cataloguing my longings and finding that they extend far beyond privatised couplehood—beyond, even, the day to day friendship and community of the people I know, much as these things are essential to me.

When I was younger I used to see living as separate from reading and writing, and sometimes I'd worry I was taking refuge in the latter as a form of cold comfort for the life I couldn't have. I don't think that anymore, if I ever really did; it's both/and, always. I've made the mistake of giving one up for the sake of the other. I do want the risk and messiness of being changed by individual relationships: I want what Sarah Schulman calls "transformative experiences of the heart". I don't want this, whatever

it is I'm doing here, to be all there is. But I do want it to be a part of what there is. I guess I want a life where I keep on turning outwards, keep letting the world in. In *The Undercommons*, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write:

Recognizing that text is intertext is one thing. Seeing that a text is a social space is another. It's a deeper way of looking at it. To say that it's a social space is to say that stuff is going on: people, things, are meeting there and interacting, rubbing off on another, brushing against one another — and you enter into that social space, to try to be a part of it.

It might be worth going back to why, when history and reading and community are sources of so much hope for me, I'm still so ashamed of these longings. I guess this stuff touches a raw nerve because I feel I'm approaching it from a position of impoverishment, of ongoing dearth. The other day, on one of my pandemic walks, I was listening to an episode of *Irresistible*, "Relational Somatics with Lucién Demaris". Demaris introduces the concept of "distributed dependencies", a beautiful phrase for something I've been arriving at from all sorts of different angles. I wish I'd had the vocabulary for it before. Demaris says it's about trying to create a life where,

...we have arrangements where there's at least five relationships that we can depend on. (...) [S]ometimes we might have a relationship and be like, oh I'm not alone. But you don't have the five relationships, so you're still suffering the consequences of not having enough of a social field where, you know, your health and your well-being can flourish.

It seems to me that having a network of distributed dependencies is about something akin to a queer life, where we're not hoarding our vulnerability and caregiving for the couple or nuclear family alone. It reminds me of Armistead Maupin's Mona Ramsey saying, "You don't need a lover if you have five close friends". But of course the point is also not to approach lovers as people you need because of a dearth of intimacy elsewhere in your life. When I heard Demaris' words, I started making a tally in my head, and of course I fell short. I don't have five people I'm sure I can depend on and flourish alongside. I counted three relationships, maybe—one a little wobbly—where I have connections that are steady, deep and

reciprocal. It might have been four, if not for the rupture I'm still grieving. Demaris goes on to say:

Well, yeah absolutely. And I do feel like you know part of this work is that first shock of disregulation when you realize that you don't have you know, sufficient size—

[long pause as Luci  n chokes up]

—social field. Yes. That's why we're building this movement, so everybody could potentially have that. Those five relationships.

I wanted to cry too when he cried; I was so moved and so relieved. It was the humanity of that pause, of his voice breaking, that made his words hit me as hard as they did. This dearth, this lack, this shock of disregulation: they aren't mine alone. It's similar to how I felt when I read Jordy Rosenberg's passage about "unheldness" in *Confessions of the Fox*:

There was an *unheldness* to them both in the world—and though differently felt, it was a certain shared Aloneness. Some utter Bereftness—of kin, of home—they recogniz'd in each other. It was in the way their bodies clawed towards each other. Diving deeper into the solitude, finding each other there. Waiting, open, giving over—*

And then the footnote:

*See, this is what I'm talking about, Reader. This is why it's good to be just *you and me again*.

What would P-Quad even *do* with this material? Call me thin-skinned, but I can't handle it with the badgering, prurient questions. Not about this. Not about Unheldness. I'm not breaking this shit down for some manager of a private testing corporation. I'm honestly—quite honestly, if you want to know the truth—not even going to do it for those queers from "nice" families. You know, the ones with supportive, rolling-in-the-dough, loving parents chauffeuring them to the mall to fulfil whatever sartorial needs they have, etc.! I mean, good

for these people, obviously. But then: Where are my people? Am I the only one who's been puked up by the bowls of history?

On the very good chance that the answer is *no*, I'm editing this for *us*—those of us who've been dropped from some moonless sky to wander the world. Those of us who have to *guess*—wrongly, over and over (until we get it right? Please god)—what a “*home*” might feel like. So forget the held ones just for a second, they're doing fine; I'm speaking to you—to us—to those of us who learned at a young age never to turn around, never to look back at the nothing that's there to catch us when we fall.

I read this in my small bed in my small bedroom in my too-small life, and Reader, it took my breath away. It broke something open: a crack in the window, the light coming in—a whole world outside I wanted so much to belong to and in and with. It's as simple, and as not simple, as saying that I felt less alone.

How do I put this? I grew up in a house of harm. My home life was one of too-common, everyday deep harms, the details of which are beside the point of what I'm trying to write here. Back then I didn't know they were common, and so I felt all alone. The experience mangled my heart, though lately I've started to feel that the damage is not beyond repair. The word for this is trauma, of course. At the same time, it's just as true that I grew up with white middle-class privilege, and with all the material security and opportunities that come with it. They were not nothing: a roof over my head, food on the table, books on the shelves, a good education. I had pets growing up, and they kept me soft. I loved them fiercely and they loved me back, in a way that made room for care and tenderness in my life.

And yet.

I worked with children for a few years. During this time I came to have a secret favourite child: a little boy who'd been coming into my workplace with his mom a few times a week ever since he was a baby. I got to watch him grow up. He was shy but liked attention, liked the fact that the staff recognised him and that we were all obviously fond of him. He and his mom made a striking figure, his black hair in sharp contrast with her red bob. Sometimes they'd dress in matching black and white stripes. When he was a baby she'd carry him around in a front-facing purple baby sling, and he'd look at us over her shoulder as she walked away. He looked so vulnerable, so small, so curious about the world. One day, after he'd started walking,

he came in wearing glittery rainbow butterfly wings and it absolutely made my day. Watching him was a source of so much delight. I've known I don't want children since I was a teenager; like many other feminists and queer folks, I have a strong distaste for compulsory motherhood and for all the gender essentialist and heteronormative assumptions that surround it. But I still loved watching them together—after all, I've always been interested in care.

One afternoon a few summers ago, I overheard a conversation between them. It was just before he was due to start school: they were browsing through the picture books, looking for a story to read together as they so often did, when he looked around and said, "When I start school we won't be able to come here anymore". His mother said, "That's a silly thing to say, isn't it?" Her tone really struck me: it was so tender, so patient, so normalising. She went on to remind him that he'd been going to pre-school all year, and yet they'd still found plenty of time to spend together. Then she talked him through (I could tell this was a familiar conversation, a well-rehearsed script) what his day to day routine would be like once school began: arriving; walking to class and saying hello to the teacher he'd already met; taking a change of clothes to keep in his locker in case he got dirty in the playground or wet from the rain; saying hello to so-and-so who was already his friend; going to the nurse's office if he got sick; being picked up after lunch on Fridays, when school finished early, and spending the rest of the day together. She addressed his fears one by one; as she went on, he visibly relaxed. By that point I had to step away from my desk and pretend to be busy elsewhere because I thought I was going to cry. It was such a clear example of secure attachment in the making. I wrote about it at the time, in a letter to the beloved friend I'm now estranged from:

I never had that: a parent who offered me this kind of safety, who talked me through the script of day to day life and the many possible deviations; who reminded me of all the contingency plans, of all the strategies we had in place to make sure I was going to be okay. It probably goes without saying that part of why I'm so drawn to them are these dynamics. I've been watching them together ever since he was a baby: watching her tenderness, her constancy, her skill with him. What kind of person would I be if I'd had that?

I'll never get to find out.

I've always felt I lacked some fundamental sense of safety and belonging in this world. When I was little I had a persistent fantasy about having a twin—someone like me, and yet not me, whose life was inextricably linked to mine. I've never told this to anyone. I have a brother, and yet I don't have a brother. In a world whose social structures don't encourage us to centre friendship, I've suffered the consequences of having limited opportunities to find this kind of solid belonging outside of romantic love—I've lived what Angela Willey calls, in the dedication of *Undoing Monogamy*, "the high costs of the naturalised privatisation of care". I've been diminished by it, and in my panic and sense of scarcity I've diminished the lives of some of the people I care about the most.

It's hard to show this to the world. I'm afraid people will run scared if they feel I'm trying to ensnare them in my web of distributed dependencies. It's hard to admit that this is both true and really not true at all. I might like us to share that reciprocal intimacy, but not as a goal every interaction has to move towards. It's okay, more than okay, if all we ever do is exchange some messages about an Indigo Girls song. I might like us to become entangled, but only if there's mutuality. (Ashon T. Crawley again: "I want to think about entanglement as a consent to be in ongoing collaboration, the collaboration fundamental to alternate modalities of existence".) If I do want that, it's not indiscriminatingly, not self-servingly, not unless you want me as part of your web, too.

This is a site of deep shame for me. The other day I took part in a group conversation where we were discussing the word "creepy", and how queer, trans and gender nonconforming folks in particular have had that word thrown at them in ways that make them feel predatory. We talked about how it can be a shaming word, a policing word, particularly around queer sexuality. Earlier that evening, a couple of folks had talked about how one of the red flags that might make them decide they'd rather not get involved with someone is that person not having enough of a network of support outside the relationship. I can see the good sense in what they were saying. But as someone who's experienced persistent isolation for most of my life, I had the panicky thought that this might well always be me. My whole life is a red flag. What makes me worry I might be creepy is exactly this: the fact that I want more close friends. The shame I feel around it is, I think, far greater than my sexual shame.

About four years ago, what I then thought of as my romantic partnership started transitioning into something else. We'd been a couple for about fourteen

years, and for various complicated reasons this transition was messy, ugly at times, not pleasant to be around. I was entering the social state mostly commonly known as “singleness”, though I follow Kim TallBear’s lead in refusing this categorisation: I am in relation. As she discusses in the podcast *All My Relations*, regardless of whether or not we’re coupled we all live lives of “relational multiplicity”, of “being in multiple good relations”, even if the truth of this is made invisible by the categories we use to orient ourselves in the world. This conceptual framework has been immensely helpful to me, and I’m grateful to the tradition of indigeneity it’s rooted in.

Still, my objections to the concept of “single” didn’t stop my friends from starting to see me as exactly that. Some of these friendships went on to reconfigure themselves in ways that surprised me. I couldn’t shake the feeling that my friends had started to pity me for being uncoupled, that I was becoming an emotional poor relation of sorts. Despite everything I said above about shame, I experienced this less as shameful than as alienating. I remember having dumplings with my friend Michael one January evening a couple of winters ago. We were talking about our lives with the refreshing candour I’d always valued about our friendship, and I told him I’d become interested in exploring possibilities for intimacy and belonging outside the couple form. But when I said that his eyes glazed over: “I like couples”, he said. “Good luck with that”. It was like having a door slammed in my face. It was a brief interaction, but it left me feeling sad. Spending time with Michael normally made me feel connected and stimulated; this was in sharp contrast with how our conversations normally went.

I remember another time, when I was visiting my friend Aisha. We were on the train back to hers after a day out in town when she turned to me and said, for maybe the third time on that visit, “You’ll find someone, I just know it”. She said it with genuine warmth and care, but it was alienating when just a few minutes before I’d been telling her that finding someone to couple up with really wasn’t what I was looking for anymore.

I hope I’m not being ungenerous. I care about my friends deeply and don’t doubt this care is mutual, but these moments and others like them were difficult to navigate. These are queer folks who are in no way strangers to departing from the rules of heteronormativity; who are familiar with nonmonogamy even. And yet I still felt that what I was trying to tell them was unintelligible, that there was no room for it in their conceptual landscape. Or maybe it’s not even that, maybe it’s just that they weren’t taking me seriously. I felt they perceived everything I was saying as an attempt at

self-soothing from someone who couldn't have the "real" thing. Singleness made me suspicious; it robbed me of any legitimacy.

These friendships changed in other ways, too. I could give you more examples, but I'm afraid I might sound bitter because when I remember these experiences I do still feel the sting. I suppose it's more accurate to say I'm afraid I might *be* bitter. I guess the most difficult thing was feeling that our new dynamics were based on the assumption that I, someone they now perceived as a single woman in her 30s, couldn't possibly have anything to offer them, the coupled. There was no scope for mutual care, for reciprocity of support, for interdependence: I was just a lonely person, always starved for whatever attention they could spare me. What could I possibly have to give? And so they started to approach me with a charity mindset that robbed me of my dignity—not because I refused the vulnerability of my "unheldness", but because I felt they were fundamentally misunderstanding what I wanted my life to be like. I felt drained and distorted, unseen, unable to connect. I know it's not my friends' fault—these are political issues that run bone deep. But it's still so hard to experience this on an individual level, in the context of relationships with people you've known for years and want to be seen by with truthfulness.

One of my fears is that in writing this essay I might be exceptionalizing my loneliness too much. I've been lonely for most of my life, largely because I grew up with harm and lack solid family ties. This also means I came late to the skills necessary for building stable and enduring friendships. I had to learn about healthy boundaries and intimacy as an adult; I'm learning still. This all happened in a world whose social and political infrastructure is already stacked against friendship and community. I feel profoundly ashamed of this, but at the same time I know none of it is out of the ordinary, and that this commonality can be a site of connection and relief. In *Lonely Affects and Queer Sexualities*, Melissa Carroll writes:

The loneliness I know, feel, study, and politicize into action does not evidence a lack of the social; rather, this loneliness is the feeling and the condition of knowing that there is something lacking in the social—the way we are in the world with others individually, and as a Western nation globally.

These social and political dimensions matters to me: it matters to say, for example, that I've been lonely in part because I used to be straight. I think that if I'd

carried on trying to live a pre-invented life, I'd still have felt this loneliness. I think I'd have felt it even from within couplehood—perhaps even without my history of harm. Because I grew up as I did, my point of departure is more vulnerable: I come to you with a starved heart. But my starved heart is not the end-all and be-all of my longing for more. This world is not enough—not for any of us. I think my coupled friends who started feeling sorry for me might be lonely, too. I think their loneliness is in some ways more difficult to articulate: the myths of romance encourage them to think it must mean there's something wrong with their relationships, and so their loneliness comes wrapped in layers of guilt and shame. I think there's something in all of this that can be a site of widening solidarity, if only we can find gentle and generative ways of talking about it.

Lately I've been immersing myself in generative somatics, in abolitionist politics, in the tradition of healing justice: in the deep and vast histories of struggles for liberation that acknowledge that reinventing our social landscape and how we relate to one another is an essential part of this work. There's a warmth to these traditions, a tenderness, a sense of being welcomed that's been a balm to my heart. The social positionality of these writers and thinkers is important, as is disclosing my own as a white queer cis femme. I'm profoundly indebted to Black liberation, to women of colour feminism, to indigeneity, to disability justice, to trans and radical queer politics. These traditions of struggle have sharpened my understanding of interdependence, and of how our ties to one another and to the world are undermined by capitalism, colonialism, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy.

In the early stages of the process of realising I was queer—or of becoming queer, if I choose to frame it differently—I became interested in affect theory, initially by way of Ann Cvetkovich and Sara Ahmed. I was especially drawn to how this field looks beyond the neoliberal logic of individualised experiences and acknowledges the public and political dimensions of our personal feelings. I'd never come across writing that made that so explicit, though I'd been hungry for it. I remember reading a Bookslut interview with Ann Cvetkovich about *Depression: A Public Feeling* years before I even picked it up and feeling it ignite something in me. "In my view" Cvetkovich said, "saying that capitalism causes depression is a really good way to take it seriously".

At around the same time, I came across what Jack Halberstam and others have called the antisocial turn in queer theory (the work of Lee Edelman, Leo Bersani, etc).

I was simultaneously drawn to and away from this work. I was starting to become interested in the possibilities offered by queer community, though I didn't yet know what they could mean for me in practice. But I was also ashamed of this longing, which made me look for reasons why I ought to be suspicious of it. I was afraid that whatever I wanted was impossible, was naïve, was no more than the yearnings of an unsophisticated mind and an unsophisticated heart. I think I circled around the antisocial theorists because of this shame, which is maybe the shame of loneliness and maybe something more. I'd like to explore what comes up for me when I try to engage with this work, and maybe grapple with my shame in the process. I'm wondering whether there's anything in here that might be productive and worth staying with.

I feel vulnerable writing this—I guess because here more than anywhere else I'm not really sure what I'm trying to say. I'm not writing to present an argument but to investigate a feeling. Then again, the kind of writing that's always excited me the most is the one where I find out what I think as I go along. There's a passage in *Girls to the Front* by Sara Marcus that's stuck with me for years: one of Marcus' interviewees says that part of the appeal of riot grrrl zine culture was that the writers “were making visible the process of figuring things out”. He goes on to say: “They claimed the space to be wrong, and I found that to be very powerful intellectually.”

I saw the same happen in mid-2000s blog culture; it's part of why I found a home there. I'm interested in having a record of my intellectual history, of my becoming. I'm interested in changing my mind in public and in adopting a “philosophy of unassumingness” (a phrase I first discovered in Sarah Bakewell's delightful book about Montaigne). I'm drawn to the idea of claiming the space to be tentative or wrong—though none of this means I'm not afraid. Still, I felt further emboldened the other day, when I listened to Maggie Nelson's interview in *The Quarantine Tapes*:

Every time my writing is boring and dead and screaming at me to edit it on the page is whenever it's drunk on seeming like it knows what it's talking about or pontificating about something, or rehearsing some political point that we all believe in and doesn't need to be reiterated. (...) It's okay to be in an endless pursuit of clarity, because every time you make something clear there will be

something else you want to make clear. (...) You don't need to fear that you'll have nothing to say.

To go back to what I was trying to say, a 2006 MLA paper titled "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory" gives what I think might be a useful summary of this work. The introduction cites Bersani's *Homos*, in which the author "makes a claim about social being itself". According to Bersani, there's "a potentially revolutionary inaptitude—perhaps inherent in gay desire—for sociality as it is known". *Homos* goes on to argue that "if there's anything 'politically indispensable' in homosexuality, it is its 'politically unacceptable' opposition to community". In other words, queerness is in opposition to community, or at least community as we're currently able to conceive of it, and this refusal is at odds with the political trends of the day. I'm not going to dive deep into Bersani, Edelman, etc because I haven't actually read them in more than a cursory way—I've found that I can't, at least not without this shame or defensiveness or whatever it is coming up in me. But that's exactly the point. This is less about their work, which I might be oversimplifying anyway (I think Bersani's "as it is known" is important), than about trying to make sense of what still makes me feel ashamed.

It hasn't escaped my notice that it's mostly the writing of cis white gay men that I have this response to: I feel small, hopeless about community, ashamed of the depth of my longing for it. In *The Politics of Trauma*, Staci K. Haines writes:

The more social and economic privilege one has—that is, access to resources, to education, to being reflected in the media and culture as having worth and dignity, to and more decision-making power in one's life or the life of society—the more one tends to interpret their experiences as their own and individually earned. On the other hand, the more our community, peoples, gender, sexual orientation, or class is impacted negatively by broader social conditions, the more we tend to see and understand that experiences are not so individual.

I've cut this quote out of a few times, added it back in, cut it out again. I wonder if I'm being simplistic. But I also wonder if by allowing antisocial theory to fan the flames of my shame I'm giving undue weight to "community is neoliberal, actually" type arguments, to writing that puts bells and whistles on cynicism and calls it a day,

to arguments from people whose positionality might have left them with a narrowed perspective. Am I conditioned to perceive these white gay men as authoritative? I think I likely am. But then I go back to worrying I'm being too dismissive, taking too much refuge in cynicism myself. And then I watch the video of Angela Davis at Black Queer Town Hall talking about decentering herself as an individual because what matters, what's made her life possible, is collective struggle, and I can't help but think, "Fuck this antisocial bullshit".

I'm now on draft five of this essay, and by this point I've surrounded myself with enough thinking that puts this into perspective that part of me wants to unwrite the paragraphs above. I might be over the hump, done with grappling with what will seem increasingly obvious the more I clarify it to myself. But considering what I said above about making visible the process of figuring things out, I think this ought to stay in. I've been reading more Ashon T. Crawley, plus adrienne maree brown, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Fred Moten, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Saidiya Hartman, Mariame Kaba, Cathy Cohen. Their work makes it clear that this kind of individualism, this refusal of sociality framed as radicalism, is deeply rooted in white supremacy. I think the answer to the question I posed is a definite yes: I *am* conditioned to perceive white men as authoritative and to allow their arguments to make me feel small. Reading the writers above does the opposite: it releases me from despair and makes me feel that life might be possible after all.

I was moved by Fred Moten's point, in an interview with Roberto Sirvent, about how the work of the Black Radical Tradition is about dismantling the notion of individualism at the heart of Western political thought. I also especially appreciated the clarity of "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens", where Cathy Cohen writes:

Queers who operate out of a political culture of individualism assume a material independence that allows them to disregard historically or culturally recognized categories and communities or at the very least to move fluidly among them without ever establishing permanent relationships or identities within them. However, I and many other lesbian and gay people of color, as well as poor and working class lesbians and gay men, do not have such material independence. Because of my multiple identities, which locate me and other "queer" people of color at the margins in this country, my material advancement, my physical protection and my emotional well-being are constantly threatened. In those

stable categories and named communities whose histories have been structured by shared resistance to oppression, I find relative degrees of safety and security.

I think the last nail in the coffin of my shame was this: between drafts six and seven I watched a zoom event called “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House: Abolitionist Feminist Futures”. It was a panel discussion with Gail Lewis, Miss Major, Zoé Samudzi and Hortense Spillers chaired by Akwugo Emejulu. I watched it at my kitchen table one evening after work in the middle of a heat wave and was immensely buoyed by the ethics of care they were discussing. The kind of queerness I want is profoundly shaped by, and overlaps with, these Black feminist ethics of care. I don’t want anything to shame me away from heeding these lessons. Going back to that MLA paper, I realise that Muñoz puts it elegantly and succinctly in his section: “It has been clear to many of us, for quite a while now, that the antirelational in queer studies was the gay white man’s last stand”.

I guess what I want to keep in all of this is what I found in adjacent work by people like Ann Cvetkovich, Jack Halberstam and Sara Ahmed. Their writing has been so valuable, such a site of space and possibility. I found room to breathe in Ahmed’s writing about hap, joy and waywardness; space in Ann Cvetkovich’s archive of feelings and in her exploration of trauma and femme sexuality; possibility in Halberstam’s celebration of refusal in *The Queer Art of Failure*. I’ve sat in an audience wide-eyed listening to Halberstam speak and left feeling all abuzz, mind and heart alike. These writers’ disruptions of the narrative of capitalist happiness and productivity have done so much for me. They’ve helped me understand why I couldn’t keep trying to make myself fit into “sociality as it is known” without feeling broken in the process: why I was looking for belonging in all the wrong places. Once that became obvious, I didn’t want to replace my search with refusal, or at least not with refusal all the time, as much as there can be relief in it. I wanted to explore possibilities for what Ashon Crawley calls “being otherwise”, for Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s “presence, not absence”. I think that’s what these writers were doing, too.

In a tumblr post titled “Negative feminism, anti-social queer theory and the politics of hope”, Jackie Wang writes about the appeal of the antisocial as follows:

For me, the (anti)politics of negation discussed by Jack [Halberstam] arise from a queer resistance to emotional flatness and the privileging of feeling good to

feeling like shit. It's about challenging the productive and rationalist logic of capitalism that makes you feel insane if you can't function within its framework. It's about thinking through how emotion informs how we approach politics and how privileging an approach that only values positive feelings erases and denies the position of people who refuse to or simple just can't feel happy about participating in such a shitty context. People who are angry or depressed as fuck and seek self-annihilation because the world demands our unity.

This is exactly it: I've felt crushed by this demand for flatness and have found escape in refusal. I've struggled to merely function, let alone feel whole. Seeing the problem articulated so clearly is a source of hope, even in the absence of concrete solutions. Wang also goes on to say,

One major critique [of antisocial queer theory] is that it invalidates and delegitimizes the work of people who are committed to queer struggle that is not anti-social, negative, anti-communitarian, or anti-identitarian in character. Constructive, affirmative and restorative forms of political engagement are portrayed as decidedly *unqueer*. (...) People who adopt an attitude of queer cynicism often shit on and belittle the efforts of people carrying out any constructive project.

(...)

I'm wondering if it's okay if I'm sometimes full of a whole lot of negativity and hope, wondering why we think of things as mutually exclusive or why it sometimes seems so hard for us to think of things as multiple.

Reading this helped me loosen the knot. Perhaps there's something here that's less about my individual shame and more about my socialist heart voicing its objections to anything that belittles material struggles. Or perhaps it's both, perhaps the answer does lie in thinking of things as multiple. I'm finding that once again these questions have lost some of their weight in the asking. I felt so burdened when I first started writing about this, so much like my heart and my politics were impossibilities. Everything seems more obvious now that I've thought about it with others. Maybe my relief is a result of what adrienne maree brown calls "exorcising the icky": bringing our shame to the light.

The queer cynicism Wang alludes to is one of the things I struggle with the most. If this essay makes anything obvious, it's that I'm nothing if not earnest. But I'm also easily shamed: as much as I may reject it emotionally, intellectually and politically, cynicism still has power over me. It feels like the cooler, safer option, the sure refuge when I'm finding it hard to withstand my own uncertainty or hesitation, my own soft core. So much of this is about struggling to accept my vulnerability, to allow myself to be seen without defences. It's easier to hide and be suspicious of those who show up with naked hopes and naked hearts. A few years ago—before queerness, but when it was already on the horizon—I was floored by the closing lines of Leslie Jamison's "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain": "I think the charges of cliché and performance offer our closed hearts too many alibis, and I want our hearts to be open. I just wrote that. I want our hearts to be open. I mean it". This might be what the antisocial theorists were offering me: alibis for my closed heart. But there's so much hope in leaving all my alibis behind, in believing that it might be possible after all to move through shame until I get to a place where I can think and write and be in the world as nakedly as this.

(Judith Butler in an essay on the work of José Esteban Muñoz: "...let me live with others, outside this isolated self, moving past shame and in solidarity against those who would derealize, diminish, or destroy our lives".)

The deep dark core of my shame is this: my thoughts are foolish and unsophisticated, and therefore I'm bad and beyond any possibility of belonging. If I feel defensive when I read antisocial queer theory, it's because I'm being anti-intellectual. Grappling with this is a waste of time; even just sitting here on my couch writing this essay on this bright summer morning is excessive, too much of an exercise in self-centred fragility. I think that's code again for "I am bad". The trouble with this feeling is that it leaves me stuck. *Joyful Militancy* gave me some useful exit points, because it frames this kind of stuckness as demobilisation, as to the benefit of what the authors call Empire: "Empire's hold is increasingly affective: it suffuses our emotions, relationships, and desires, propagating feelings of shame, impotence, fear, and dependence". I could give up on writing before I even start, but I think perhaps my silence wouldn't help. It wouldn't make for what Judith Butler so helpfully calls liveability: for a "sense of expanse with an uncertain limit [that] is not merely personal liberty but collective movement". Collective movement requires me to join in; joining in requires me to be seen.

So far I've only alluded briefly to the fact that I'm writing this in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic. For the past few months, I've scanned the news for the daily tally of the dead. My experience of lockdown has been deeply shaped by class privilege. I've been working from home, safe in a public sector job that has, so far at least, sheltered me from any serious financial concerns. This privilege infuses everything I'm writing, in the same way it infuses my life. For example, I write about travelling often, about being able to see beloved friends in far-flung corners of the world: my scattered affective community, who I've nevertheless been fortunate enough to share space with. In order to travel I've had to save, to budget carefully, to count my pennies and cents, but I've still been able to do it without any considerable material deprivation. I've never gone hungry and I've always had stable housing. Both of these experiences have shaped my life profoundly.

The beginning of lockdown coincided with a stark rupture with a beloved that has caused me enormous grief. For the first few weeks of the pandemic, I was so immersed in it that I felt separate from the world. I think, looking back, that it wasn't the grief so much as the attending shame. I watched mutual aid groups form around me and felt too stuck to join in, too certain I had nothing to contribute. I watched *Riverdale* for hours every day. I worried for the world, for those I know and love as well as those I don't, but all my care was far removed, as though my heart was wrapped in cotton wool. My heart was broken, and yet somehow I also felt that I didn't have a heart. The shame fed itself: the more I gave nothing, the more I felt I had nothing to give.

And yet, in an unexpected way, this time also opened up a space where it became possible for me to heal. We moved into spring, into day after day of beautiful sunshine. The magnolia trees down my street began to bloom. I worked from home, and occasionally went out for groceries or for walks by the river. For those first few weeks of lockdown the streets were nearly deserted; it felt eerie to walk in the sunshine and rarely see another person. I listened to a lot of podcasts: in the months before Whitney Spencer's letter and Kate Werning's resignation I was listening to *Irresistible*, and learning so much from the queer and BIPOC guests. I listened to *Queer Spirit*, to *Nancy*, to *The Log Books*. I read about generative somatics and about transformative justice. I looked up yoga videos on YouTube in the middle of the day, to ease my back pain and try to be in my body a little more. I got enough sleep. I picked up *A Queer Love Story: The Letters of Jane Rule and Rick B  bout*. I read it as

slowly as I could, trying to make it last, and felt Rule and Bébout's warmth and generosity, their expansive vision of queer life, friendship and solidarity, begin to bring me back to life. When I finished the book, I felt like I was parting ways with old friends.

Little by little, the myths of separation began to recede. I sat on the grass and read Virginia Woolf. One early morning, when I was reading outside, I remembered an evening last summer when my now estranged friend and I had watched the sunset on Ocean Beach from the dunes. Pelicans were flying past overhead and we were kissing a lot: we had so much fun kissing, found so much pleasure and delight in each other. Earlier that day we'd been on the Dyke March, had seen the Dykes on Bikes, had been handed abolitionist pamphlets by Gay Shame. We'd watched *To the Stars* at the Castro Theatre and had gone to the GLBT Historical Society, where we saw the exhibition "The Mayor of Folsom Street: The Life and Legacy and Alan Selby" (co-curated by Gayle Rubin, though I didn't know it at the time). One of the items on display was a letter one of Selby's lovers wrote him on the 2nd January 1995, the day before my 12th birthday. He was dying of AIDS, and in the letter he thanked Selby for the tenderness, joy and belonging he'd helped him discover in the leather community. "You have brought into my life", he wrote "(...) A deep sense of community spirit; avenues of opportunity to help others. (...) Always there for me during good times and bad (...) hugging me just for the joy of love."

That letter moved me so much. After the exhibition we'd met our friend Helen for lunch, and when we mentioned it she said that Selby had actually been her neighbour growing up; he was, she said, "a total sweetheart". The coincidence felt incredible: it made me feel connected, a part of the flow of this tender and expansive queer world. My heart was full to the brim. That day was so far removed from my current life as to be nearly inconceivable. But then I touched the ground, felt the earth and the grass underneath my fingers, and suddenly I had the thought, "It's still the same world". It felt momentous, like a revelation, and the memory didn't feel so far removed after all.

Some much of my heart's thawing has been the result of being able to fend off some of capitalism's demands on my time. I carried on working full-time, but without the pervasive surveillance of even a gentle workplace I've been able to pause, rest, and be in the world in the ways I need to be. I've been able to breathe, watch videos of Tourmaline and Dean Spade discussing abolition, send a message to a friend, dip in

and out of group discussions—all in the middle of the work day. I’ve had the space to step deeper into the kind of world where I want to live. I’ve been hanging out in queer Discord servers and WhatsApp group chats, where I talk to and learn from other queers. I’ve learned specific tips for living, learned to add a spoonful of peanut butter to my porridge as a small daily gesture of sustenance, of pleasure and joy. In the early stages of my grief, I couldn’t even bring myself to have a cup of herbal tea before bed. I didn’t think I deserved even such a small gesture of care.

I’ve been going to queer events on Zoom, where I get to see the small tiled face, living spaces, and cameo pet appearances of queer folks all the world over. I’ve surprised myself by wanting to turn my camera on: I’ve wanted to be one of them, one of us, alone in my bedroom with my homemade rainbow bunting behind me, together on dozens of screens. I’ve been participating in queer somatics care circles, in cross-border relationship anarchy support groups, in abolitionist reading groups. I went to Duke University Press’ “Dispatches on Temporality: AIDS & COVID-19”, joined a queer mental health check in where we talked about *The Body Keeps the Score*, watched Sarah Schulman and Claudia Rankine in conversation from my bed, watched Hannah Gadsby’s *Douglas* with semi-strangers and *The Half of It* with my beloved friend Marian.

I’ve been surrounding myself with soft hearts and sharp minds, with thinking that gestures towards another world. I think this has allowed my imagination to become more radical: less because these ideas and commitments are new to me than because I’ve been able to fend off the everyday’s ongoing assaults on what I believe to be possible. I want to be careful and precise in how I make this point: I have absolutely no interest in being one of five people in a room patting ourselves on the back for being more radical than thou, taking a look at everyone around us and deciding they’re not able or worthy of being mobilised into an ever-expanding vision of solidarity. This other world I long for, it’s for everyone: I want to help throw down the walls and kick open the gates, so that a radically interconnected life becomes conceivable to us all.

I don’t even want queerness, as much as it’s offered me the possibility of a political home, to be the dividing line. “Queer politics”, Cathy Cohen cautions us, “has served to reinforce simple dichotomies between heterosexual and everything ‘queer’”. It wouldn’t be fair to say that the people who inhabited my everyday before the pandemic were deadening my imagination; it’s just that they weren’t—at least not

yet—able to sustain me with the ties of radical friendship that make this struggle seem possible. It would benefit us all to do that for one another. “Friendship and resistance are interconnected: when we are supported, we are more willing to confront that which threatens to destroy our worlds” (*Joyful Militancy* again). In other words: I was lonely, and it shrank my world. Widening it again has brought me such relief.

At the start of lockdown I joined an all-queer reading group. It happened as a result of a series of accidents, a series of little moments when I said yes even though I was so grief-stricken that I wanted to say no. Every one of those yeses has helped build a crescendo that’s moving me a little closer to that longed-for queer horizon. I’m reminded of another one of my favourite Adrienne Rich poems, “From a Survivor”, which has the lines:

...and you are wastefully dead
who might have made the leap
we talked, too late, of making
which I live now
not as a leap
but as a succession of brief, amazing movements
each one making possible the next.

The first of these moments of saying yes happened when someone I knew from Lex invited me to a queer WhatsApp group where people were keeping one other company during lockdown. “If you’re craving a bit more interaction”, she said, “this place is pretty active”. I said yes, eavesdropped for a few weeks, felt alienated by the fast-paced conversation of strangers, felt I had nothing to contribute. But then one day I was well enough that I suggested we share shelvies, photos of our bookshelves, and I happened to spot adrienne maree brown’s *Pleasure Activism* on someone else’s shelf. I said I had a copy I’d been meaning to start on my bedside table, and that led to about a dozen of us deciding we were going to read it together. The person whose copy I spotted, my new friend Varsha, created a separate WhatsApp group and got us organised. Since then a core group of us have been meeting over video chat on Sunday evenings and keeping in touch via our smaller group chat in between. The conversations we’ve had have been vulnerable, thoughtful, earnest, funny, open-hearted. There’s been a lot of “exorcising the icky”, of casting light on our shame.

We've been community-building, creating camaraderie and solidarity and relief. It's given us all hope.

These people have welcomed me, have been immensely kind to me, have encouraged me to write. I wouldn't be writing this right now if not for the belonging I've experienced with them. They've allowed me to envision the possibility of a beloved community. Varsha, Bea, Eva, Xander, Kat, Hazel, Rauha: I like them all so much individually, and like us all so much together. It's a precious thing. When my parents' dog, the last remaining pet from when I still lived at home, died during lockdown, they offered me words of comfort. My grief was magnified by the fact that I couldn't tell my estranged friend, who knows the history of this canine love. Their kindness helped me through.

In early drafts I wrote what I'm about to say next very tentatively: I said I couldn't yet tell if whether were going to become friends, but what we'd given one another was already so much. That remains true, but by now it's clear that we've already become friends. On Tuesday 2 September 1930 Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary: "I use my friends rather as giglamps: there's another field I see, by your light. Over there's a hill. I widen my landscape". How wonderful to know people, however passingly—how expansive.

The writers and thinkers we've been exploring together have also made it possible for me to write. If I've made it this far, it's thanks to reading and relationships, to reading as relationship. I've been building a patchwork of citations as a model for interdependence. I want to allow, as Harney and Moten put it in *The Undercommons*, "subjectivity to be unlawfully overcome by others".

During lockdown I watched *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years* and felt the full power of her admonition, "But when we are silent / we are still afraid / So it is better to speak". I finally read *This Bridge Called My Back*, whose foreword quotes a 1980 Kalamu Ya Salaam interview with Toni Cade Bambara where she says, "The most effective way to do it is to do it". I reread parts of *The Gift*, where Lewis Hyde writes,

The imagination can create the future only if its products are brought over into the real. The bestowal of the work completes the act of imagination. Ginsberg could have said, 'O dear, now I'm hearing voices,' and taken a sedative. But when we refuse what has been offered to the empty heart, when possible futures are given and not acted upon, then the imagination recedes. And without the

imagination we can do no more than spin the future out of the logic of the present: we will never be led into new life because we can work only from the known.

I let these words sit with me. I went for more walks in this too-small town, along the same routes where one year ago I felt so trapped. This time I turned down streets where I'd never turned before: I turned them into what Sara Ahmed calls "hap walks". I read Gloria Anzaldúa for the first time, also in *This Bridge Called My Back*. In "La Prieta" she writes:

Why am I compelled to write? Because the writing saves me from this complacency I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. (...) Finally I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing.

I asked myself whether this was true, whether I was more scared of not writing than of writing. I think perhaps it is. I'm afraid of not acting upon the possible future I can more or less see. I'm afraid of refusing the possibility to become more intimate with myself and you. I'm afraid of saying no to whatever other possibilities might unfurl after those first few yeses.

I kept on reading. I came across Mia Mingus' blog, and was struck by her concept of "leaving evidence":

We must leave evidence. Evidence that we were here, that we existed, that we survived and loved and ached. Evidence of the wholeness we never felt and the immense sense of fullness we gave to each other. Evidence of who we were, who we thought we were, who we never should have been. Evidence for each other that there are other ways to live—past survival; past isolation.

My pre-queer life is so well-documented: I blogged for ten years, existed in public, poured words upon words out into the world. I did it tentatively at times, but I did it anyway. The silence that has followed, at least so far, fits into certain historical patterns, and I don't think I can bear that anymore. Writing is, again, a gesture towards a queer future that might never arrive, but it helps me get unstuck in the here and now. I want to leave evidence of how everything I am I owe to others, to the queer writers who came before me and to the people who've touched my life. Audre Lorde says in *Sister Outsider*: "Each one of us is here because somebody before us did something to make it possible". And Rebecca Solnit writes in *The Faraway Nearby*:

Listen: you are not yourself, you are crowds of others, you are as leaky a vessel as ever was made, you have spent vast amounts of your life as someone else, as people who died long ago, as people who never lived, as strangers you never met.

I've been wondering lately if the reason why I've felt compelled to circle around antisocial writing that makes me feel small has to do with boundary damage: with growing up in a house of harm, with always thinking I was at fault when something didn't feel right. But perhaps it's worth asking myself this: who do I want to spend my time with intellectually? Who creates possibility for me, and who makes me want to retreat into silence?

Recently I also read adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy*; her point about saying yes to whatever will create more possibility was another thing that gave me hope. If I don't write, I'll foreclose all possibility for the kind of sociality I long for. If I do write, I'll at least create space for it: for the possibility that putting my subjectivity out there into the world might be a generous act, one that could result in something expansive and valuable for other humans as well as for myself. It all seems so unlikely from where I'm standing right now. But perhaps it's enough that it might happen. Rebecca Solnit was the first writer who taught me to think of hope as a praxis, as "the embrace of the unknown": not as optimism, but as the discipline of sitting with uncertainly for long enough that we hold space for whatever might come next.

I'm also thinking about Edythe Eyde, whose episode of *Making Gay History* filled me with delight. In June 1947, under the penname Lisa Ben, she wrote the first

issue of *Vice Versa*, the grandmother of queer zines. *Gay LA* describes her project as follows:

In creating *Vice Versa*, Eyde was addressing an imaginary community, one much broader than what she saw at softball games or at the bar—a widespread gay women’s intellectual and political community such as had not yet come into existence in America.

I love the idea of writing as a way to prefigure a beloved community, as a way of bringing it into existence. It’s taken me ages to figure out how I might do this outside of capitalist structures, but I think perhaps this is how. I wasted years thinking it just wasn’t possible anymore.

As I said before, the diy culture I found in my mid-2000s blogging circles was essential to me as I was beginning to explore feminism and develop the intellectual interests that would help me become my current self. The people I befriended around that time were just that, people: we were human beings trying to feel our way through ideas and sustaining one another in the process. We were not yet trying to “network”. But then I watched the blogging world become increasingly professionalised: the pressure to “monetize your blog” and to gain mainstream legitimacy infused everything, and it affected how people treated one another. The dynamics became less cooperative and more competitive. Witnessing this happen in real time got me down, and for a long time I allowed myself to believe that capitalism had simply put an end to the kind of spaces I craved. I don’t think that’s true anymore. I’ve read enough history that I now realise this tale is as old as time: capitalism tries to absorb these spaces, but we create them anew again and again.

One summer, back when I had a blog, I went to a world-renowned convention where fans and professionals mingled. This event had been marketed as primarily social, but people came wearing all their raw hopes for success under capitalism on their sleeve anyway. I say this with no finger-pointing—this stuff’s in the very air we breathe and it gets inside our heads. People are desperate for success because we’re made desperate by scarcity. But these conditions make for uneven social dynamics, and for me the convention was an unsettling experience.

I enjoyed the panels I attended: it was nice to listen to writers I admired talk about their work. But most of my interaction with other attendees felt off. While I was

waiting in the corridor to get into a Cory Doctorow reading, someone struck a conversation with me. After the initial pleasantries this person leaned closer, read my name tag, and then walked while I was still mid-sentence, presumably when they realised I had no credentials that marked me as someone who might be useful to know. At the time I was part of a blogging collective that was moderately well-known in those circles, but for various complex reasons I'd deliberately left that claim to clout out of my name tag. This might have meant that in this person's eyes I had no power, no social capital—I wasn't in a position to give them a leg up.

This interaction was jarring, and only one of several that weekend that made me feel alienated. I ended up leaving the convention early, and for a day or two I felt pretty down. It's hard not to take it to heart when people treat you like you don't matter. It wasn't until years later, when I read *The Gentrification of the Mind*, that I was able to make full sense of what had happened that weekend. Sarah Schulman writes in detail about what she calls "supremacy ideology": a kind of social dynamic "in which people get ignored or disrespected, or attended to and praised, based entirely on their social positioning". This is of course part of the logic of capitalism. I want to be in spaces where we treat people like people: where everyone's humanity is a given, a point of departure, and not something you have to prove or earn.

Lately I've been thinking about the difference between social media and spaces that strike me as a little more democratic, like group chats or Discord servers: in the latter, once you join you have a voice. If you send words out into the world, they'll be read by your fellow human beings who are in that space with you. You don't start out by talking to yourself, and you don't have to do anything in order to prove you deserve to be followed before you even get to be heard. I don't mean to be too much of a naysayer about social media as a whole: I know it's a mixed bag. I joined Instagram recently and it's brought me a lot of joy. But this is something that's been on my mind a lot: how the dynamics are stacked against us from the get-go; how they twist how we express ourselves and interact with one another; how this is done by design, as part of a business model where our alienation increases the profit margins of billionaires. For a long time, I couldn't imagine finding connection or community online outside of social media, and it really diminished what I believed to be possible.

In "Clout Culture: Queer Liberation and Social Capitalism", Prof. Ound articulates this issue and links it explicitly to white supremacy. They say, "Clout culture means people's worth and the value of their word or their work is formulated

around how well they can move or have moved through the system”. Their piece also led me to MerriCatherine’s “Social Capitalism”, which explores the problem in depth and also offers some hope:

It is important to not be discouraged by capitalism’s omnipotent presence within social media. It is even more important to reimagine social media without capitalism: a world where no one’s voice is shut out, a world where abusers are all held accountable in online spaces, a virtual world without bullies and capitalists, a space to vent without being isolated, a world without addicting incentives in the form of colorful validations and broken promises of attention, and where your private info isn’t leakable to law enforcement... A world that is still beautiful and full of nuance and passion: a place to be, without the unnecessary stigma against personal identity.

These days I like the idea of writing a zine instead of a blog because I think I need a little distance from the immediacy of blogging. I need to gesture, in whatever ways I can, towards the world I’d like to inhabit. To me this means slowing down and finding more of a balance between being with myself and being with others. Blogging led me to friendship and community, but in some ways it also fed my anxieties. It was too incessant, too fast-faced. I think I need a rhythm that won’t make it quite so easy to feel discouraged by lack of engagement, real or imagined: by that feeling of having to earn the right to speak before I even begin, or by the suspicion that I have to fit into certain moulds to deserve belonging. I need to make it easier on my heart, in a way that mean I’m caring for myself without refusing the vulnerability of being seen. It’s about boundaries again, I think: about creating a buffer that might make it possible to give of myself more genuinely while remaining grounded.

I remember once reading a quote from a manga artist that touched on this. I hate not crediting my sources properly, but it was many years ago and I can’t remember their name or enough details to be able to find it again. They were saying they had a hard time imagining growing up and becoming an artist today: they felt that constantly sharing their art in public while they were still figuring out what kind of artist they wanted to be would likely have shaped their direction so much, in such specific ways, that they might not have had the space to become who they ended up becoming. There was something in this that resonated with me, especially in the

context of the kind of social capitalism and supremacy culture I was immersed in at the time. Maybe this sounds like it contradicts my earlier point about “making visible the process of figuring things out”, but I don’t think it has to. I think perhaps I can be tentative and in dialogue with the world, can acknowledge that the thoughts I currently have didn’t spring into being fully-formed and owe everything to others, while still carving a secluded space for them to breathe before I’m ready to share them widely.

I don’t mean to imply that sharing work in progress publicly will inevitably have a dulling effect. What felt truthful about what that quote wasn’t about there being a risk that community might taint some sort of “pure” individual artistic vision. It was more about how capitalist social dynamics can demobilise us and make us feel so ashamed and afraid that we give up before we even start. It’s *The Gentrification of the Mind* again, “Social Capitalism” again. I’m sure the context of the sharing also makes all the difference: is it into a community where we have nourishing ties that make us feel safe? Is our belonging a given, or are the stakes artificially inflated by the feeling that it hangs in the balance? Are we trying to prove our worth, or are we creating from a position of inherent worthiness? It’s about the depth of our relationships, and I’m sure plenty of artistic communities did have that kind of depth. The other day I read Kelsey Ables’ “The Rise and Fall of Internet Art Communities”, about the early days of DeviantArt, and it made me nostalgic for the Internet where I grew up. It’s not all in the past, though. We can make these spaces now.

Another reason why writing a zine appeals to me is that I like the idea of writing in the margins, of belonging to the undercommons, of engaging in what Harney and Moten or Robin D. G. Kelley call study. I want to create something as far removed as possible from the structures of capitalism and its compromises. In “War on Reality”, Malcolm Lasalle examines the double-bind of the artist committed to liberatory work who is also trying to make a living. They say, “We have to re-appropriate resources from our wage-labor to be used outside the market and effectively construct real community that can support our struggles”. Because I have stable employment and class privilege, I’m able to disentangle my writing from my survival. This zine wouldn’t exist otherwise.

It also wouldn’t exist without the pandemic allowing me solid blocks of time away from the demands of work. Tillie Olsen writes in *Silences*,

Substantial creative work demands time, and with rare exceptions only full-time workers have achieved it. Where the claims of creation cannot be primary, the results are atrophy; unfinished work; minor efforts and accomplishments; silences.

I was very struck by *Silences* when I read it nearly a decade ago: Olsen's compassion and attention to the individual consequences of uncaring political systems was in sharp contrast with all the victim-blamey writing advice I kept seeing online, which equated writing success with little else other than individual determination. These days I also have Rebecca Solnit's "Women's Work and the Myth of the Art Monster" at the back of my mind: it's true that we need time, but care work isn't necessarily an interruption, nor is it inherently incompatible with creative work. It would be unfair to suggest Olsen didn't know this, and the central thesis of *Silences* certainly still stands: having time and space matters; the material conditions of our lives matter. I hate that COVID-19, combined with disaster capitalism and government neglect, has cost so many human beings their lives. These truths coexist with the fact that the past few months of respite have given me the space to write.

This is, I suppose, more scaffolding of the kind I want to leave in. I'm trying to make visible the process of this zine's becoming, much like I'm making visible my own becoming. I'm also being deliberate about documenting how, in addition to my material conditions changing, I came to allow myself to have a voice. It's been hard, and I do wish it could have been easier. I wish my belonging had been a given. But at the same time I don't covet the easy authority or unshakeable confidence stereotypically associated with straight white cis men. I see value in my tentativeness, in my receptiveness, in my porousness and openness to the world. I refuse to see this process of examining myself, of situating myself, as shameful or wasteful. I think perhaps this is femme praxis at work.

I'm susceptible to Mariame Kaba when she says, in *Rebel Steps*, that as we move towards the abolitionist horizon,

...maybe more people will make more things. And what I mean by that is I want a million experiments. I want more people to try more things and to not be afraid of failure but to embrace that failure is an actual inevitability if you're going to try to make something.

I'm susceptible to Wendy Moffat, who writes in "The Archival 'I'", "Be sure to leave your record so that the young Moffats and Bartletts of the world will be able to read it in the future"; to Hugh Ryan, who says in the epilogue of *When Brooklyn Was Queer*, "I look forward to the book that comes after this, and the one that comes after that, and the one that maybe you're going to write". Their words are so generous, so welcoming: they create so much space for all of us to do and be. I want you to know, dear reader, that I also look forward to the book or zine you're maybe going to write, or the things you're maybe going to create. I hope so much that the material conditions of your life make it possible for you to make them.

I've long since thought that more people should be making more things; lately I've been trying to extent that logic to myself. Some days are harder than others. The other day a much-liked, much-retweeted quip crossed my timeline. It was something along the lines of, "The most insidious pipeline of all is the podcast listener to podcast host pipeline". I'm put off by this kind of snark, to be honest: I don't like making fun of the idea of people making things. I find it ungenerous, an example of social media at its most facile. I know the joke is meant to be at the expense of stereotypical overconfident mediocre people who think the world needs their ill-informed opinions on everything. I've met these people and I've rolled my eyes. In practice, though, this kind of joke is unlikely to discourage them and much more likely to have a silencing effect on those of us watching from the sidelines who already feel small, who already doubt whether we should be making thing. I'm sure a lot of ill-conceived podcasts were started during lockdown, and a lot of hasty zines were written. Maybe this is just one more. But I want a world in which all these things get to exist, and where we're intentional about what we give our limited time and attention to and about the voices we uplift.

I think these are all good reasons to write my maybe hasty zine. If I need to, I have a few more: because writing begets more writing, makes further writing possible, takes my mind and heart to places I didn't know they would go. Because, as Rebecca Solnit says in *The Faraway Nearby*, writing makes it possible to articulate truths that are too detailed, too subtle, too nuanced to do justice to otherwise. Because writing is the only thing that gives them the space they need to unfurl in their full complexity.

While writing this I thought of another reason, which might be essential to how I want to live. I'm starting to suspect that writing might be something that contains me,

that boundaries me within myself in a way that makes relationships possible without overwhelm. A lot of the time I'm afraid that if I open up I'll drown myself and everyone around me. But writing allows me to spill without overflowing—it directs the flow. I recoil from the idea that everything we need is within ourselves—I don't want detachment from the world, don't want to buy into myths of independence and individualism under any other guise. I can't say enough that everything I am I owe to others. But there's a balance here that's been difficult for me to find. I've had to do a lot of boundary healing over the past few years, and it's been difficult to separate these insidious disavowals of interdependence from what I do need to take to heart in order to heal. Part of this work involved getting to a place where I could find enough grounding, enough of a sense of object permanence about the people I love, that I could connect safely and exist in interdependence. These are the deepest scars the house of harm has left in me. I'm starting to think perhaps writing can be a mediating factor, a point of departure that stops me pouring out with drowning intensity. Writing can be a raft.

Around this time last year I was in San Francisco. I wanted to do something special around the 50th anniversary of Stonewall, something I'd remember forever. San Francisco is not New York, but the West Coast is where I had personal ties, where I could be with beloved friends. Before my friend travelled down to meet me, I spent a few days in the city on my own. Those days were filled with some of the most joyous and connected solitude I've ever experienced. On the 28th of June 2019, 50 years to the day since the start of the Stonewall riots, I went to Bolerium Books, a radical bookshop on Mission Street. You have to know it's there to be able to find it—it's upstairs in an office building, not really visible from street level, and you ring the doorbell in order to be let in. I spent the better part of two hours browsing through the lesbian pulp section and the queer studies section. As I came in, the bookseller at the register told me that the books were organised not necessarily by subject, but by social movement. They had first editions of Ann Bannon, of Valerie Taylor: I ran my finger down their spines lightly, lovingly, a little bit in awe. I saw a copy of Karen Brodine's *Illegal Assembly* I still regret not getting. I felt giddy with joy. While I was there another two queers came in, one of them wearing a Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants "Queer as in fuck your borders" t-shirt. I almost said hello.

My heart was in such a state. I was on the verge of tears, thin-skinned, so open to the world. It still moves me to remember what it felt like to be there. At the same

time writing about it brings up more shame. I feel ashamed of sounding unsophisticated, a small town girl wide-eyed in the big city. But oh, the humanity of that. Gayle Rubin writes, in “The Leather Menace”:

Laura, the heroine [of *I Am a Woman*], suffers vague malaise in the Midwest, so she takes a bus to New York City. Eventually, she stumbles into a lesbian bar in Greenwich Village. She instantly realises who she is, that there are others like her, and that this is home. She finds a lover, develops a gay identity, and becomes an adult, functioning lesbian.

This kind of migratory behaviour is characteristic of sexual minorities. There are many barriers to the process. These include the marginality of dissenting sexual communities, the amount of legal apparatus built to control them, the social penalties to which their members are subjected, and the unrelenting propaganda that portrays them as dangerous, sleazy, horrid places full of dreadful people and unspecific pitfalls. It's extraordinary that young perverts, like salmon swimming upstream, continually and in great numbers make this journey. Much of the politics of sex consists of battles to determine the costs of belonging to such communities and how difficult it will be to get into them.

“Young perverts, like salmon swimming upstream”. I grew up so much scarcity. Now here I was, visiting with abundance. I spent my teens and the better part of my twenties in places where queerness was not a possibility I was able to imagine for myself. I had to move away in order to become. But even so, the scarcity has continued. I'm used to walking into secondhand bookshops, looking for the queer section, and finding at most half a shelf I can scan in thirty sections. I still look every time, hoping that I'll find a book that might help change my life. I don't have access to an academic library, no say over my public library's decimated budget, and a limited disposable income. Secondhand books have been a lifeline. There's always the Internet, of course, but nothing beats the joy of the unexpected, the promise and possibility of a secondhand bookshop. Once I found an entire queer shelf at an Oxfam bookshop in Norwich and it was the highlight of my summer. They had a copy of *Against Equality*—I couldn't believe my eyes.

I know how much San Francisco has lost. The gentrification, the blatant inequality, the precarity, the loss of life and liveability: I could see them everywhere, clear as day, and as a white middle-class European visitor I am not separate from those losses. But there was still enough to lift up my heart—enough history, enough queer culture and worldmaking in the here and now. There was Mission Thrift, with several bays worth of queer books for less than \$2, where I got a copy of *Cherry Groove*, *Fire Island* and a paperback of *Staying on Alone: Letters of Alice B Toklas* for 50 cents. There was the James C. Hormel LGBTQIA Center at the San Francisco Public Library and the Frameline programme. There were all the grassroots groups I saw at the Trans March and at the Dyke March. Across the bay there was *Queer California* at the Oakland Museum, where I saw panels from the AIDS quilt, copies of *Vice Versa*, *The Ladder* and *One Magazine*, one of José Sarria's gowns. There was something immensely moving about queerness made manifest, made tangible, in objects that could be seen and touched. Everything seemed plentiful, so far removed from the narrow imaginative possibilities available to my younger self.

I was on a tight budget on that trip, so I gave myself permission to get one book at Bolerium Books. I decided on a copy of *Sapphistry* by Patrick Califia. When I went to the register to pay, I didn't feel ashamed. The bookseller—the one who'd explained how the store was organised when I came in—asked me if I wanted to sign up for their "Lesbiana" newsletter. He said I'd get a weekly e-mail with a selection of their newly arrived books and ephemera by and about queer women. "The best stuff goes fast", he explained. I said yes. We talked a little more, and just as I was about to leave he told me, "Now go out there and make some trouble". I promised that I would, and have held those words close to my heart. I've been getting that newsletter every Thursday for nearly 52 weeks: it's been a beacon on some of my dullest days, when my horizons felt at their narrowest. It's helped me when I felt at risk of being drowned by the everyday. It's been a reminder that places like Bolerium Books do exist, that my life can have such luminous moments, that queerness is a horizon I can keep moving towards.

I'm not sure whether I've made enough trouble. Trouble is collective, and I've been too alone. I haven't always known what trouble could look like for me. But I think writing without shame—despite shame, through shame—might be a part of my particular brand of trouble. Writing might be one of my forms of queer worldmaking, which is troublesome in itself. David Wojnarowicz wrote in *Close to the Knives*,

To place an object or writing that contains what is invisible because of legislation or social taboo into an environment outside myself makes me feel not so alone; it keeps me company by virtue of its existence. It is a kind of ventriloquist's dummy—the only difference is that the work can speak by itself or act like that 'magnet' to attract others who carried this enforced silence.

This zine is my magnet. If it speaks to you, then I hope we'll find each other. Maybe we'll be friends for life, embedded in one another's webs of distributed dependencies. Maybe we'll have a single interaction where we exchange some lines about a poem, a quote, or a song about Virginia Woolf. Maybe you'll point me towards more writers and thinkers engaged with what I'm exploring here. Maybe you'll help me find that anecdote I thought I'd read in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. Maybe we'll inhabit the in-between, which is a space of infinitive possibility.

In order to make this possible, I'm throwing my windows open. I'm putting my heart out there into the world. It took me so long to get here, but I'm here now. Here's to doing this for the rest of my life.

2. Becoming Queer

I'd like to tell you more about how I got here.

I'd like to tell you the story of how I arrived at queerness late in life, or at least later than the most recognisable coming out narratives account for. I want to make the process of my becoming visible—a process that is as much political as it is personal. This is the story of how I became radicalised, which is inseparable from the story of how I became queer.

This will be a story told in layers, in moments scattered across time. To begin with, there's what I'm writing right now: this zine written in spring and summer 2020, in the midst of global uprisings against white supremacy, police violence, racial capitalism and the carceral state, and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, there are the notes I wrote two years ago, in a text document I titled "Writing Project" and didn't open again until recently. Lastly, there's my coming out letter to my friend Kay, written sometime in 2017. My 2018 notes document says, at the top of page one, "Go where it hurts. Don't shrink away from it". I think I still remember what I meant by that. I'd like to try to keep these temporal layers visible, to keep them in dialogue with one another. I want to be provisional: I want to be, as much as possible, in dialogue with myself.

(An interlude: the week after I drafted this opening paragraph, I watched an online event for the launch of *Isherwood in Transit*, a new essay anthology edited by James J. Berg and Chris Freeman. It was Saturday evening; I was eating smoked paprika fries and watching the event with my headphones on while my housemates moved about. The weather had been strange all day, with heavy gray clouds threatening rain overlapping with moments of bright sunshine. The feel of thunderstorms was in the air, and there was an eerie quality to the light pouring into my living room. I felt happy, of the world and in the world.

One of the guests was Wendy Moffat: she talked about "The Archival 'I'", her essay about queer archives and intergenerational encounters between writers as exemplified by E.M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood. As I heard her describe the process of "knitting oneself into the great chain of queer kinship", I was floored. I ordered the book, and a few days later I read the full essay sitting at my kitchen table in the early evening sunlight. Moffat talks in detail about how Isherwood's writing is full of examples of "the fossil self", "accreted in sedimentary layers" and

in dialogue with itself: it was all so close to what I'd been trying to say it felt unreal. Fuck Harold Bloom and his anxiety of influence: seeing Moffat articulate this so clearly, and link it so explicitly to queer history and to a queer sensibility, I felt belonging. I rejoiced.)

This isn't just the story of the moment when the intensity of my desire for another woman became undeniable. I'd like to shift the angle, move away from attraction as my only yardstick, and look at everything that came before and everything that's continued since. What values was I committing to when I became queer? What is this queer sensibility that I recognise? I don't want to sideline my desire—it did and does matter—but I want to look a little further back. I want to start with my summer of Frank Ocean in the park after work, the summer when *Blonde* came out. I'd missed out on the excitement around *Channel Orange*, but that summer I read an article about *Blonde* that mentioned queerness and I knew I had to listen. And then of course I fell in love, which you'd think might have been a hint. I think what I was hearing in those songs was longing, a deep longing for a way of life I was on the verge of being able to articulate. It was a time of almost, a time of nearly there, and nothing brings it back as vividly as those songs.

There's a lot I could say about compulsory heterosexuality, but this isn't quite that story either. This is about that summer and the time before and after, when I was also reading Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City*, Adrienne Rich's *On Lies, Secrets and Silences* and *The Dream of a Common Language*, Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Sarah Schulman's *The Gentrification of the Mind*, Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal*, Meg-John Baker and Jules Scheele's *Queer: A Graphic History*. Queer books, all of them. I was feeling more and more implicated, more and more like I'd found my home. There was something there I'd been looking for but had only found in vestiges, had only heard in whatever echoes made their way to mainstream culture. It was exhilarating to see it articulated in full.

This happened in spring, summer, early autumn: towards the end of that year I embraced the word "queer". Looking back now, it's hard to understand how I could have held on to the idea that I was straight for so long. Or I do understand, but this is one of those places that hurt. Holding on to "straight" was a foreclosure of possibility, and I still remember vividly what that felt like. I want to write, "Because I was an adult, because I'd seen enough of the world, I didn't feel ashamed", but I

think that would be a partial truth at best. I do think it's true that I didn't need convincing that gay was good. It's also true that I didn't necessarily feel invested in straightness—I hadn't for a long time. My deep wells of shame were located elsewhere. I'd been saying for some time, somewhat wishy-washily, that I didn't much care how I identified, so there was no point in laying claim to "queer" or "bi". Another turning point: Milton, my then partner and good friend, asking me that autumn, "If you don't care either way, why do you default to the default?". My answer was complicated: I *wanted* to be queer. But the trouble is that I was surrounded by enough mainstream bullshit that I didn't think I was allowed.

That summer there was a heat wave in September. One afternoon, when I had the day off work, I went to the park by the river near my house—the same park of my pandemic walks. I was reading Karen Brodine's *Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking* and of course listening to *Blonde*. When I first got there I sat too close to the riverbank and had a narrow escape when a swan lunged at me. I moved further away from the water, put my poetry book aside, and started reading an article about queerness on my phone. I don't remember enough to cite it properly, but in this case it doesn't matter so much because it was one of many like it. To paraphrase it broadly, the author was saying that the experience of growing up with homophobia was *the* defining experience of being queer, and therefore it should be the golden ticket into community. Anyone who lacked it should not be let in.

The gatekeeping wasn't even subtle, and if I were to reread it today I suspect I'd also spot TERFy, biphobic, and other assorted dog-whistles. Even then I knew enough not to think this person was right. Milton was half a world away, visiting his parents for a few weeks, but I remember he'd read it too and we were texting about it while I was at the park. We both called bullshit. Still, my heart was heavy, because deep down I already knew. I knew I was arriving at queerness, but reading things like this made me feel I could never claim it for myself and be accepted. I knew my story was one of saying yes, one of becoming, but I didn't yet know whether such a story would be intelligible to the rest of the queer world. I half-imagined going into queer spaces and being asked to account for myself, which I couldn't have done while this stuff was still so raw. I feel vulnerable even now, four years later, committing this to writing alone on my couch in my cookie monster pyjamas. My fears weren't entirely unfounded: queer gatekeeping did and does

happen. But so does solidarity, so does generosity, so does being welcomed. My silence, as Audre Lorde put it, would not and could not protect me.

I suppose I wasn't just afraid of being hurt, but also of causing hurt. In my old writing project notes, I wrote about how I didn't want to cause pain to anyone who'd known themselves to be queer for most of their lives: to people who were queer children against the odds, queer through isolation and rejection, queer amidst danger and violence, made homeless because they were queer, queer when they were little and alone and afraid. One of my beloveds is one of these people, and I always think of the enormous tenderness I felt when she came out to me as a fourteen-year-old. But now I pause at the idea that my truth would cause hurt just because it's not the same as someone else's: this strikes me as another example of the capitalist myths of scarcity and competition at work. My story doesn't have to crowd out other stories. Growing up queer is an experience distinct from my own, and that distinctiveness is something I'll always make space for. But surely there can be abundance and multiplicity: there can be room for all of us.

In my notes I also wrote, "I don't want to load my writing with too many disclaimers, to anticipate every possible misunderstanding and pre-emptively address it. It will kill it dead". I wanted to write about becoming queer, but I felt too constrained by narratives of biological essentialism, too alone in my resistance. I'd read Hanne Blank's *Straight*, so I knew enough history to have some context. But I hadn't yet read enough to know that my understanding of queerness was not only intelligible but part of a long tradition of social constructivism that's linked to radical queerness, to political resistance and struggles for self-determination, to anti-assimilation, to trans politics. I hadn't yet read Jack Halberstam, who says in *Trans** (and oh, how my heart rejoiced when I read this) that in his work he has

...laid out the implication of a model of queerness that is not simply about what kinds of bodies have sex with what kinds of bodies, but about different life narratives, alternative ways of being in relation to others, and new practices for occupying space. For example, I proposed that we might privilege friendship networks over extended families when assessing the structures of intimacy that sustain queer lives, and we might also think of transgenderism in particular as not simply a contrapuntal relationship between bodily form and content but as an altered relation to seeing and being seen.

I didn't know about Chuck Rowland, a radical homophile activist who fought some of our earliest battles against assimilation in the 1950s, and who said in his interview with Eric Marcus, "I had experiences, emotional experiences, that I could not have had as a heterosexual". I hadn't read that secondhand copy of *Against Equality* I would one day find in Norwich. I hadn't heard Dr Kim TallBear say in her *Multiamory* interview (quoting Angela Willey) that "to be queer is to be against the state"; or Joan Nestle say in the final episode of the *Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony* podcast, titled "What Does the Term 'Lesbian' Mean to You?", "I find any argument to biology a very difficult one (...) I don't want a biological definition to be what opens or shuts the door, and how we got to that point is very upsetting to me". I didn't know that at some point in the 1950s Lorraine Hansberry had written on an undated notepad,

Since it does not follow that all which proceeds from nature is in any way automatically desirable for human good, it is silly and baseless to posit the rights of homosexuality on the remote (+ in some sense irrelevant) possibility of its possible congenital character.

The more I read and explored, the more I realised I was in good company. Queers throughout history have used this term to indicate a commitment to a set of political values, an embrace of friendship as a way of life. I became less tentative. I was emboldened by echoes of Foucault, and eventually by Foucault himself:

The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships. And, no doubt, that's the real reason why homosexuality is not a form of desire but something desirable. Therefore, we have to work at becoming homosexuals and not be obstinate in recognizing that we are. The development toward which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship.

I still want to make space for all possible experiences of queerness, and to be very tender with other queer folks as they tell me how they got here. But I feel miles away from a world where my truth is unsayable. I'm leaving this in because once

again the scaffolding matters: the making visible of the layers, the pointing to the path that brought me here. Before I found my way to queer spaces—both tangible and historical; both material and textual—I inhabited a world where imagining my life felt impossible. I want to preserve the memory of what that felt like, and maybe leave a roadmap for those who also want to find their way out. I hope it might do the opposite of what reading that gatekeepy essay in the park did for me.

Right now I feel very far removed from that fear that what I'm saying might be misappropriated—that I might be giving homophobes &c arguments they'll use to rob us of legitimacy, or more importantly to wage material violence against us. I still understand it, of course. But I've moved far enough towards the queer horizon that those people are no longer who I'm in dialogue with. They don't get to set my parameters; I refuse to be constrained by what they might think. This wouldn't be possible without a queer community. I've come to realise that we get to have conversations that are for us, where we talk to one another regardless of who else might be able to keep up. These days I'm able to say that I dislike the narrative of "born this way" in both of its popular iterations: as late 19th century eugenics-infused pathology and as contemporary appeal to liberal tolerance. The underlying assumption is the same: Who would want to be queer? What, apart from biology, could possibly justify it? Who would choose this, unless you couldn't help it? Me, that's fucking who—I'd choose this every time. I'd say yes to my queer potential over and over again. I can't imagine my life, my liveability, any other way.

There's another reason why my truth felt unspeakable for so long: because I sense there's a link between the too-small room of my childhood and my longing for a queer life. Until I read Jen LaBarbera's "Welcome Effects: When Sexual Violence Turns Girls Queer", it didn't occur to me that I could ever put this into words. LaBarbera writes,

These are terrifying, real, hard truths:

I am queer.

I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, a survivor of emotional abuse and neglect, and a survivor of rape.

I do not see these aspects of my identity as separate, or separable. They do not exist as isolated truths. Each identity plays into and informs the other—the concept of intersectionality applies here, too.

(...)

The way my life has panned out, there is a connection. There is a link. It is, at least in part, a causal one.

Reading this essay was a lot, for reasons I'll go back to. Another moment of emboldenment: somehow or other I came across Jane Ward's "Nobody is Born Straight (Or Gay)" around the time it was first posted, and when I read the following I almost joined the dots:

I was as authentically heterosexual as any woman I knew. But later, several years into my exploration of feminist politics, what I once found desirable (heterosexuality and sexism) became utterly unappealing. I became critical of homophobia and sexism in ways that allowed these forces far less power to determine the shape of my desires. If this had not happened, no doubt I'd be married to a man. And if he wasn't a complete asshole, I'd probably be happy enough. But instead, I was drawn to queerness for various political and emotional reasons, and from my vantage point today, I believe it to be one of the best desires I ever cultivated. [Does this mean that your daughter may decide to be a lesbian if she takes some women's studies courses? Yes. Whatcha gonna do now?!]

I remember especially loving that provocative final sentence: I felt a thrill at the possibilities, at the wide open doors. In my 2017 letter to my friend Kay, I wrote

I don't feel that mine is quite a story of uncovering a long-buried truth about myself so much as it is a story of growing into it. I don't necessarily feel that I was denying the truth back then, but rather that my truth was less than what it could have been, less than what it would become, because my life was narrower in so many ways.

I was feeling my way through the nuances of my experience, hungry for a vocabulary that would help me make sense of it. I still stand by that letter, but I think back then I felt vaguely that I could have lived a life worthy of that name had I never become queer—that I could have been, as Ward puts it, happy enough. That

has since changed radically—this whole zine is a testament to that. Yet the fact remains that none of this means I always meant to be queer. What it means is that I was doing what human beings do: we become.

Another excerpt from my writing project notes: “When I read queer writing I hear the echo of Rilke’s ‘you must change your life’: ‘for here there is no place / that does not see you.’” I first came across Rilke by way of *Tiny Beautiful Things*, and I read *Letters to a Young Poet* the autumn of my becoming. On a torrentially rainy day in October, just after my Frank Ocean summer, I took a half-day off work and got on a train to London. I was going to a talk by Cheryl Strayed in the early evening, and to an Angel Olsen concert immediately after that. But before either of those things, I walked from King’s Cross into Bloomsbury and went to Gay’s the Word for the first time. I remember messaging my friend, the one I’d felt a stab of desire for, and telling her I was at the bookstore from *Pride*. She was newly back in my life after a period of estrangement, and it felt miraculous to be able to do that. I felt so much joy and delight: in knowing her again, in *Pride* and its vision of solidarity, in visiting that bookshop when I was on the verge of acknowledging that queer spaces might be for me.

Later that evening Angel Olsen played “Sister”, which is probably my favourite of her songs. There’s a crescendo towards the end where she repeats the line “All my life I thought I’d change”, but when I first heard it I misunderstood the lyrics and thought she was singing, “Oh my life it’s got to change”. To be honest I kept on hearing that even after I knew those weren’t the words, and when she played that song at the gig that’s what I was thinking about: my life, it’s got to change somehow. A few hours before, Cheryl Strayed had quoted Rilke at her talk: “You must change your life”. I’d been reading Michael Warner and Olivia Laing that week, and I’d had the thought, loud and clear, “How do I queer my life?” Something was coming. It felt imminent, almost tangible, like I was just about to be able to say it out loud.

Some six months later, just outside King’s Cross station, I’d kiss another woman for the first time. The sex my friend and I went on to have in the years that followed is not unimportant. At the same time, I’m uncomfortable with how those experiences grant this story a kind of legitimacy it might otherwise lack, both in the eyes of the world and in the deep dark recesses of my heart. It’s bullshit, but I think

that's exactly what happened: until I slept with my friend, I didn't feel I was allowed to claim queerness as my own.

There's a lot here to untangle, but I'll start with this: when I felt desire for my friend, I had the capacity to sit with that experience, to observe it without reacting. There was no gay panic, no repression or denial. In a heteranormative and patriarchal world, that capacity was not a given. It had been built through my reading, my emerging radical politics, everything I was discovering about how I wanted to live. I want to zoom in on that—less on the feeling of desire itself or on whether it led to actual sex, and more on how I became someone who wouldn't instantly recoil from that experience. Again, this has been a process that's inextricable from my politics. It happened because, as Ward says, the forces that had once shaped my desires had lost much of their power. This isn't universally true; I know there are plenty of gays with bad politics. Nevertheless, it's been true for me.

From my letter to Kay again:

I feel that the way I interpreted my experiences of attraction to other women was very much dependent on the possibilities that were available to me. (...) I can trace this story to its origin, more or less. But again, it's not a story of being led away from some sort of 'natural' heterosexual default. I could just as easily flip the tables and trace the story of what led me to heterosexuality when I was younger in the first place, away from where I am now: of what narrowed my possibilities.

In the years that followed I'd go on to read, with great appreciation, Gayle Rubin's *Deviations*. I found further emboldenment in passages like,

Human bodies with human brains are necessary for human cultures, but no examination of the body or its parts can explain the nature or variety of human social systems. The belly's hunger gives no clue as to the complexities of cuisine. The body, the brain, the genitalia, and the capacity for language are all necessary for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experiences, or its institutional forms. Moreover, we never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings that cultures give to it.

Elsewhere in *Deviations*, Rubin uses the analogy of our capacity for language learning versus learning a specific language to make a similar point about human sexuality. Reading Rubin helped me push against what Ward calls the “moral and political imperative of gay biology”. Here was a social constructivism that was steeped in queerness, that had credentials, that wasn’t diminished by concerns about playing into our enemies’ hands. I’ll always be grateful for *Deviations*. But thinking alongside Rubin also poses some problems, or at least leaves me with some sites of tension I can’t quite resolve. Rubin also says, in a conversation with Judith Butler:

By defining lesbianism entirely as something about supportive relations between women, rather than as something with sexual content, the woman-identified-woman approach essentially evacuated it—to use a popular term—of any sexual content. It made it difficult to tell the difference between a lesbian and a nonlesbian. These were tendencies of thought common in local lesbian communities. Adrienne Rich in a way codified a certain approach that was widespread at the time, in which people didn’t want to distinguish very much between lesbians and other women in close supportive relationships. (...) I did not like the way in which lesbians motivated by lust, or lesbians who were invested in butch-femme roles, were treated as inferior residents of the lesbian continuum, while some women who never had sexual desire for women were granted more elevated status.

I have to try to stay with my ambiguity. Because yes, I do see the lesbian continuum, and hold Adrienne Rich close to my heart. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” showed me a way in. I don’t know that I necessarily want to “distinguish very much between lesbians and other women in close supportive relationships”. If I’d read Rubin sooner, before the sex I had with my friend, would I have felt that a door was being slammed in my face?

The other day I heard someone use the phrase “materially queer” to draw a distinction between queer-identified folks who’ve had queer sex and those who haven’t. They didn’t say it unkindly—they were very careful to clarify that this wasn’t about gatekeeping who got to claim the term “queer”, but about

distinguishing between different kinds of experience. But when I heard that, I still felt a stab of shame. It wasn't really about this fellow person's turn of phrase or about their legitimate attempt to articulate their experiences; it was more about my own baggage. In my head there was an immediate tier of legitimacy: have I had enough sex, I wondered, to count as one of the more genuine "material queers"?

I'm also thinking about asexuality and how it plays into these discussions. I want to delight in my queerness, and that does include its physicality—the sexual, the sensual, the joy of the in-between. But I also don't want to fall into a kind of narrow queer exceptionalism that risks becoming reactionary. What feels most radical in the vision of queerness I favour is exactly the political: its implications for how to live. There are people in the world who came to similar politics and relationship ethics by completely different routes; people who are (to echo Mariame Kaba in *Rebel Steps* again) co-strugglers in this fight. Leaning into these sites of solidarity doesn't make me worry that the uniqueness of queer sexuality might become threatened or be diluted, and I wonder whether this too is a reflection of my particular range of experiences. As I think alongside Rubin, I also have Cathy Cohen at the back of my mind:

Even in the name of destabilization, some queer activists have begun to prioritize sexuality as the primary frame through which they pursue their politics. (...) Experiencing "deviant" sexuality as the prominent characteristic of their marginalization, these activists begin to envision the world in terms of a "hetero/queer" divide.

I found Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics" an incredibly helpful and generative warning about possible missed opportunities for solidarity if we go too far down the path of white queer exceptionalism. It all rang so true to me. For example, when I read Robin Wall Kimmerer's incredibly moving essay "A Mother's Work" in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I realised that what she was writing about was profoundly aligned with my vision of a queer life. She tells the story of restoring a pond for her daughters to swim in over a period of twelve years, and finishes with a vision of care that is far more expansive than the limits of the nuclear family. She writes,

The circle of care grows larger and caregiving for my little pond spills over to caregiving for other waters. The outlet from my pond runs downhill to my good neighbor's pond. What I do here matters. Everybody lives downstream.

The same is true of Leighan Renaud's "Beyond the Nuclear: The Caribbean Family". In a nod to Erna Brodber's novel *Nothing's Mat*, Renaud uses the image of circular sisal mat as a model for a family that doesn't close ranks against the world. "The mat is never finished", she tells us,

– there is always a hanging thread which means there is always room for it to grow. In rejecting nuclearity for a fractal model that can always be expanded, Brodber honours the Caribbean family as one that is infinitely expansive.

There's also Mia Birdsong, whose work I discovered as I do final edits to this zine. So many examples, so much alignment. I'm trying to sit with ambiguity, to find room for both/and. I'm thinking that perhaps there's no need for these things to pull me in different directions, that perhaps the sites of tension get to coexist.

I'm also wondering whether it's possible to be emotionally and politically drawn to queerness, as Ward says, and yet not divested enough from heteropatriarchy that if you feel a stab of desire like the one I felt for my friend, you carry on recoiling from it. As much as I'm in favour of interrogating our desires, it feels ungenerous to immediately attribute investment in heteropatriarchy as a motive for what other humans do or do not want, or do or do not act upon. Or perhaps it would be ungenerous to assume that's the only possible motive. I know the fraught history of accusations of false consciousness. I know we can be careless with one another's hearts. I can't speak for anyone else, but perhaps I can speak for myself. And yes, I can imagine a world where that might have happened—where I might have said no instead of yes, where I might have turned away. I can imagine that happening in a world where—long before Cohen, Rubin, Butler or Foucault—I hadn't read quite as many Anne Rice novels as a teenager (for all their limitations, they did help queer my fourteen-year-old heart), in a world without *Velvet Goldmine*, in a world without Virginia Woolf.

Rubin also cautions us against justifying the shape of our desires by imbuing them with inherent political superiority; there have been times when I worried I

might be doing that. I don't mean my politics are radical *because* of my desire for my friend—I mean that there were specific life circumstances that allowed me to expand my lexicon of social and erotic possibilities, and those circumstances are undoubtedly political. They're the same circumstances that make me want to help dismantle heteropatriarchy and white supremacist capitalism. And of course Rubin isn't arguing against understanding our sexuality as shaped by social and political factors—I mean, that's the whole point of her work. She only cautions us against having to come up with respectable political credentials for our desires before we feel we're allowed to articulate them. That's not entirely dissimilar from the logic that made me feel I wasn't allowed to lay claim to my queerness.

I want to decentre sex in my account of queerness, but not in a way that denies that sexual stigma still exists and is still used to justify violence against us. “It is necessary”, Rubin reminds us, “to recognise repressive phenomena without resorting to the essentialist assumptions of the language of libido”. I know the context around which Rubin is writing. I've felt the sting of butch-femme shaming; have read *Pleasure and Danger*, *Speaking Sex to Power*, and Dorothy Alison's “Public Silence, Private Terror”; have sided with the sex radicals every time. I've felt, at times, that I owe them my life. I come from abuse. I stewed in so much shame growing up. The word “repression” is too small. How did I come to have the sex I had, coming from where I come from?

Last summer in San Francisco there was a morning when I walked from the main branch of the public library to the SOMArts Cultural Centre to see their exhibition “Precarious Lives”. I walked through South of Market and down Folsom Street, the heart of the leather community, without realising where I was. Despite the ongoing assaults of gentrification, a public sexual culture was still visible enough for me to notice it. I spotted the leather stores and bars and the kink café. I walked past a sign that said, “These streets belong to you”. I felt a deep debt of gratitude, deep enough it made my eyes well up. This was a few days before the Alan Selby exhibition. All around me there were markers of a history of battles fought against shame, battles that reverberate in my own life, battles that carved out the space where I now get to move. “I'm super aware”, Mia Birdsong tells Prentis Hemphill in *Finding our Way*, “of the ways in which people who are having to push against our cultural and societal boundaries to just be themselves are also creating more room for me”. I felt that awareness, and the moment felt profound.

Later that day, I went into Good Vibrations on Valencia Street. Even just writing down this sentence is a lot for me. If I've come far enough that I could have sex that was that joyful, that expansive, that healing, it was largely thanks to the generations of sex radicals that came before me.

There's a deep truth in saying that the queer sex I've had did matter and did help me become. I'd never want to disavow that. It's just that I don't want it to be the golden ticket into queerness, any more than I'd want growing up with homophobia to be that ticket. Rubin was writing the essays I quote from in the 1970s, 80s and 90s; what we've learned from asexual and aromantic communities in the decades since has added complexity to this. When I read these discussions, sometimes I feel a sense of affinity, of being implicated. I've used "demisexual" on occasion, mostly as a useful form of shorthand to explain the kind of circumstances where I feel comfortable enough for desire to emerge. So far that's always been when trust and emotional connection already exists. I suspect this is at least in part tied to my history of abuse. I'm sure there are some contexts where this part of my truth is unsayable, too. I haven't wanted to crystallise "demisexual" into an identity, but I've appreciated having the language to communicate succinctly with new acquaintances without being required to jump right into intimate details, or disclose the ways in which I've experienced harm. I want to make space for queer experiences outside of sex without becoming complicit in projects that uphold sexual stigma or shame. Likewise, I don't want to be complicit in dismissing asexuality. I have no solution but for us to be infinitely gentle with one another as we share our truths.

But let me retrace my steps: I felt desire for my friend, and I didn't recoil from it. I took a step forward when I could have taken a step back. From where I'm standing right now, that step forward seems inseparable from my longing for a different way to be in the world. My becoming queer was about saying yes to all of it. And to keep on telling you how I got here, I have to look back even further. I have to start with feminism, because feminism was a crucial part of why the social, cultural and political forces that had created me came to have, as Ward says, "far less power to determine the shape of my desires".

The basic premises of feminism have become so obvious I almost feel like I could leave them out, except I remember my life before them all too well. I used to say I wasn't a feminist. It seems so absurd now. It's an understatement to say that I

grew up with a constant barrage of slut-shaming. In order to police my sexuality, my parents policed every aspect of my life. I grew up hearing “Because he’s a boy”—put that plainly, that undisguisedly—whenever I asked why my brother was allowed simple freedoms I was not. This is an easy example to give; there are others that cut deeper, that feel unsayable still. But somehow, if you’d asked me back then, I’d still have said that sexism wasn’t a force that constrained my life. I remember actually saying this: being sixteen and saying, with all conviction, that I didn’t think being a girl had ever held me back. Because I remember this so well, there’s a lot I can’t take for granted now.

The main reason why I rejected feminism was actually pretty simple: the echoes that had reached me were steeped in gender essentialism, and so they immediately put me off. In the childhood development module of my psychology class we studied Carol Gilligan. I bristled at the title *In a Different Voice*, and even more so at the idea that women were inherently gentler and more caring. I called bullshit: I knew the tumult of my own heart. Plus my mother was abusive, and so none of it could be true. As I wrote in my letter to Kay, these narratives robbed me of the painful truths of my life. Two decades later here I am, having arrived at femme: a declaration of my lifetime commitment to care. I’ve grown into someone who deliberately tries to practice radical softness, to be tender and emotionally available, to bring gentleness into everything I do. In heteropatriarchal culture, these qualities are both superficially exalted and not so subtly despised. But unlike the gender essentialist model of idealised white femininity I encountered as a teenager, femme does make room for all of this: the mess, the tumult, the hard edges, the contradictions, the full range of our humanity. Femme is intentional. Femme is a daily radical praxis.

Looking back on my sixteen-year-old self breaks my heart. Most of what I needed, of what could have transformed my life, already existed somewhere out there in the wide world. But I didn’t find it—I didn’t even know to look. Then one day in my early twenties I read Virginia Woolf. In a moment that almost made up for my previous miseducation, we read the Shakespeare’s sister section of *A Room of One’s Own* in class. Suddenly there it was: a decades-old challenge to “Because you’re a girl”. I felt its impact in my bones. It was impossible not to see the links between Woolf’s carefully drawn political argument and the narrowing of my own life. When we got to the final lines—“[She] killed herself one winter’s night and lies

buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle”—I was trying to hide the fact that I was tearing up. Despite the limitations of a vision rooted in middle-class whiteness, Woolf’s imagined story remains powerful. It’s a striking illustration of the impact of oppression on what Dean Spades calls “the distribution of life chances”. It leads to where it most often leads: to premature death. I think it hit me so hard exactly because it was so concrete, so tangible, so bodily, so material. I understood that these things had cost people their lives.

After that I started reading more: I read Mary Wollstonecraft, Anne Sexton, Hanne Blank’s *Virgin*. I went through a joyful, expansive phase of reading every feminist debunking of gender essentialism I could find. I read science, history, the history of science: I discovered Anne-Fausto Sterling and Cordelia Fine, and then Rebecca Jordan-Young, Carol Tavris, Cynthia Eagle Russett. I read Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. I was gleeful to come across writing that claimed the space for women, men, and non-binary folks to be fully human. Eventually I found my way to Audre Lorde, to bell hooks, to Angela Davis, to the Combahee River Collective. I moved away from white liberal feminism and towards Black feminism, towards queer theory, towards writers and thinkers who were not fucking around. I moved towards the long and complex histories of liberation movements whose much wider scope is the only way forward, the only way to give us all what we need to sustain our lives.

This was a process that took me years, and I don’t want to forget how much I once needed the basics. I needed them in order to transform my affects, the way I made sense of my feelings. I also wrote to Kay that “to come to see myself as queer, I had to unlearn layer after layer of internalised sexism and see women as fully human, in every possible sense”. When I say this, I don’t mean that I’d ever really bought into the myths of gender essentialism. The truth is a little knottier. It’s more that I’d learned not to centre women in my emotional life. The roots of this ran so deep they were impossible to name.

I had my first kiss at fifteen. In what has been by far the most adventurous phase of my life so far, I went on to kiss a dozen or so boys in the two years that followed. I hid this carefully from my mother, in anticipation of the slut-shaming that inevitably followed. But looking back on my teenage romances, it strikes me as absurd to say those were the places in my life where I was experiencing intimacy.

The boys I kissed were mostly semi-strangers; the meat and bones of my emotional life was in my complex friendships with other girls. It was in sleepovers at my friend Magda's house and in my inconsolable tears when she transferred to another school halfway through ninth grade. It was in swapping Anne Rice novels back and forth and making mixed CDs for each other. It was in talking to my friend Vera about our wounds around mothering, in telling another human being for the first time about my history harm. It was in fighting dirty with my friend Sofia because we knew so well how to hurt each other. It was in my frequent bouts of attachment panic at the thought of losing my friends.

It isn't that looking back now I realise I was actually in love with my friends. Saying that these friendships should have been romances instead isn't necessarily true. The truth is much queerer and much more subtle than that. It has to do with the fact that I was light-years away from "Friendship as a Way of Life". When we were thirteen, we'd make silly videos of ourselves dancing around to the Spice Girls. We grew up with external "girl power" messages, but they were never more than superficial. Misogyny made me devalue other girls, but so did dominant cultural messages about couplehood and romance. Capitalist heteropatriarchy simultaneously tried to sell us products based on the idea that friendship lasts forever and taught us that we'd cast one another aside the second we had a boyfriend. It taught us that we were disposable, that we were nothing but placeholders in one another's hearts.

I needed the world to mirror my emotional landscape more accurately. Because I didn't have that, my understanding of myself was distorted. I was left without a blueprint to navigate the complexities of these intimacies. I was easily angered when it came to other girls. Every time a girl hurt me, that hurt was tinged with a sense of resentment and wrongness it took me years to make sense of, let alone break free from. Unlike in straight romance, there were no glamorous undertones to the work that went into ironing out bumps in these relationship, into strengthening our bonds, into improving communication. There was no "it hurts because it matters" narrative to peg these experiences onto. There was just exasperation, and bewilderment at the fact that these feelings were far more central to my life than I was able to acknowledge.

Sarah Schulman writes, in *Conflict is Not Abuse*,

On one hand, lesbians give each other meaning in private, and yet this requires a transcendence of lifelong messages about women's lack of worth. Treating another women with decency, care, forgiveness, and flexibility is certainly not an automatic impulse.

The impulse was definitely not automatic. The hurt, the fear and the vulnerability I experienced with other girls were not acknowledged in any stories I knew; the joys were never celebrated. The energy I poured into my relationships with them was never portrayed as exciting or worthwhile. If friendship wasn't a smooth ride all the way, we were told we were embodying stereotypes and proving to the world that girls will inevitably backstab one another. The narratives of heteropatriarchal romance narrowed what was supposed to count as my real emotional life, and what I was left with was nowhere near enough. I wanted more intimacy. I wanted so much more than what straight couplehood could ever hope to offer me.

Fast forward to my straight adulthood. In 2015, Kim Brooks published an article in *The Cut* titled "I'm Having a Friendship Affair". The description reads, "A look at the intensely obsessive, deeply meaningful, occasionally undermining, marriage-threatening, slightly pathological platonic intimacy that can happen between women". I was immediately struck by one word in particular: "pathological". Brooks' piece is a perfect illustration of the dynamics I was trying to describe above: she acknowledges—though not in these terms—a lifelong longing for more intimacy than what a life of privatised couplehood could ever hope to offer. She recounts the intensity of a newly formed friendship with another woman and comes close to naming the elephant in the room. Then she leads readers back to the safe terrain of heteronormativity and of the nuclear family, the questions she poses neatly tucked away. Brooks is a good writer and articulates the problem well. She explicitly names, for example, the resentment of other girls I felt as a teenager any time I couldn't deny I loved them enough that they could break my heart. After a fight with her new friend, Brooks says:

I hoped that our friendship would return to normal, and it did, mostly. Still, there was a slight undercurrent of hostility that hadn't been there before, a frightening knowledge that we could hurt each other as expertly as we could raise each other up.

But what struck me the most was the following passage:

My therapist, who'd been listening to all of this unfold, week after week, finally put forth an observation. "This is not normal," she said.

"You think it's a really fucked-up friendship?"

"I wouldn't use the term fucked-up."

"What term would you use?"

"Deeply regressed is the one that comes to mind."

Usually deferential to her insight, I found myself rebelling. "Why?" I said.

"Why is it regressed to want to have intense, meaningful, complicated relationships with people you're not fucking related to? Why is it regressed to want to have a best friend?"

She thought for a while, the way therapists do. "Because you already have one," she said. "He's called your husband."

Brooks comes so close it's actually heartbreaking to watch. She says, about her therapist, "I knew she was right", but a few sentences later she also asks, "And yet, why should this be the case? (...) The idea that a husband should not just be a husband but a best friend, an everything, a partner's entire emotional world, is a recent one". She wonders at one point whether the intensity of her feelings for her friend might mean she's gay, but crucially she never wonders whether she might be queer. Queerness, the kind of queerness where I've found a home for my heart, doesn't appear to be a part of her conceptual landscape. It's the elephant in the room. The decades and decades of deep thinking and writing about the exact kind of questions she's grappling with are absent, as though they never existed at all. They don't seem to have made their way into the world Brooks inhabits. It's impossible to read this and not see how much that is to her detriment, just as it once was to mine.

As the end of the piece nears, Brooks gradually accepts that her new friend coupling up will inevitably mean they'll grow more distant, and that this is what's supposed to happen when you're an adult—when you're not, in her therapist's words, "deeply regressed". She accepts that the dearth of intimacy in her life must

mean there's something wrong with her marriage. She starts couple's therapy. She recommits to a white middle-class heterosexual life.

Reading this did real damage to my heart. I wanted to cry. I couldn't, wouldn't, accept this life, this living tomb of a straight life. I wanted so much to find a way out. But before queerness, this was all I had. It was the only reflection I could find of the deepest longings of my heart. Because Brooks' articulation had been so compelling, her cop-out of a conclusion hurt all the more. Where was "Friendship as a Way of Life" when I was reading this bullshit? I'd been thinking for a while that I should go to therapy to deal with my trauma, but I was desperately afraid that this was the sort of forced indoctrination I would find. I e-mailed the passage about Brooks' exchange with her therapist to my friend Joan and wrote:

I started hate-reading that article, by the way, because the title and the description infuriated me so much. But by the end I was too deflated and crushed by sadness to even be angry anymore. Not all therapists in the world would necessarily want to pathologise wanting to connect with people in meaningful ways beyond the strict, culturally-sanctioned norms of couplehood, but I'll bet you anything in the world it would take me more than one attempt to find one who wouldn't default to exactly that.

I'm so grateful I was able to listen to that self-preservation instinct. When I did try to find a therapist some years later, this was exactly what happened. I could fill a whole other zine with horror stories about my search. But by then I had found queerness, and so I was inoculated to an even greater extent. I was able to walk out of their stuffy offices and never look back. The vision of life Brooks' therapist urges her to accept seems to me a living death. Queerness (Cathy Cohen is on my mind again) is not the only way out, but it happens to be mine. It would be easy to make jokes about how the straights are not okay and call it a day, but I still remember too vividly what it was like to be trapped within such a narrow range of possibilities. The straights are not okay in the same way a lot of us are not okay, because this life is not enough. Being so cut off from one another serves none of us well.

I've been rereading some of my old writing and finding traces of my longing for queerness everywhere. How revealing, how satisfying, to dig through my own archive. Ten years ago, when I first listened to Sufjan's "Futile Devices", I knew I

wanted the vision of love as fluid, generous and full of space that it presents. I knew it five years ago when I read Jasna Todorović's "The Bigger Picture of Polyamory", which talks about how once we throw away the scripts that neatly separate friendship from romance we're left with wide possibilities for the shape each of our connections might take. I knew I wanted non-monogamy before I knew I wanted queerness, without quite realising that what I was looking for in each of those things was the same. I wanted to throw away the script. I wanted a less privatised life. I didn't want to join another person in closing ranks against the world.

I lived these things before I explored them formally, but in time I found my way to books and zines, to podcasts, to subreddits and Discord servers, to polyamory unconferences where I didn't always feel at ease. Some of the models I encountered then seemed to extend the premises of monogamy to multiple romantic partners while leaving them intact. Eventually I discovered relationship anarchy, which has been a better fit for my values. RA is also a broad tent, with some more libertarian-leaning corners that are definitely not for me. But I value the strand that's politically engaged and focused on community care—on networks of distributed dependencies. I also started reading more Kim TallBear, whose writing at *The Critical Polyamorist* has deepened my understanding of how much my relationship ethics are about living in accordance with my politics, with my wider values. I particularly appreciate her framing of non-monogamy as "a method of (good) relating" as opposed to an identity:

"Identity" as a concept does not necessarily imply ongoing relating. It might imply discrete biological conjoinings within one's genetic ancestry and it can spur alliances, but it can also exist as a largely individualistic idea, as something considered to be held once and for all, unchanging within one's own body—whether through biological or social imprinting—as one's body's property. Similarly, I don't want our polyamorous relating to calcify into individual identity claims that risk us looking too much within our own persons for a definition of who we are. Rather, I want us to remember that we are always becoming, in part in relation to one another. If we remember that we are what we become as much or more than we are who our properties determine us to be, I suspect that will help us focus on how to relate more

carefully with one another as beings in the world, both within and beyond romantic relations.

“We are always becoming, in part in relation to one another”. The reason why I’m queer is exactly this: the fact that “we are what we become”. The more I read history, the more I realised that these relationship ethics have been a part of queerness all along. Finding this tradition has given me a sense of lineage, of historical belonging. But another thing my reading has made obvious is that these ethics are also rooted in Black, brown and indigenous traditions: I’m deeply indebted to the tradition of indigeneity within which Kim TallBear is writing, as well as to Black and woman of colour feminist thought. The pushback against these modes of being in the world is rooted in white supremacy. The project of heteropatriarchal individualism and the project of racial capitalism are one and the same. Hugh Ryan makes this link explicit in an essay called “How Eugenics Gave Rise to Modern Homophobia”. Backlash against queerness has always happened in tandem with the violence of colonialism and white supremacy.

Middle-class whiteness comes with so many blinkers. It took me a long time to realise how much practicing solidarity was also a part of the life I longed for. In *Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit writes about the suffocating nature of a life confined strictly to the personal, and also about the deep, unacknowledged joys of solidarity and public life:

Even the bestselling semiliterary novels I picked up seemed to shrink away from the full scope of being human. It was as though the rooms the characters lived in had no windows, or more terrifyingly yet, there was nothing outside those windows. We were consigned to the purely personal—it was not the warm home to which we might return from the politics of Day or the seascapes of Lopez. It was not the shelter at the centre of the world, but all that was left: a prison.

The world is much larger, and these other loves lead you to its vastness. We are often told of public and political life merely as a force, a duty, and occasionally a terror. But it is sometimes also a joy.

She goes on to add that “we lack the language for that aspect of our existence”, which is something I’ve felt deeply. The image of a room without any windows stayed with me, I think exactly because it gave me that language. I found myself coming back to it whenever I felt trapped in my personal relationship turmoil (caused in part, I see now, by being cut off from the vastness of the world); whenever I was stuck in what Harney and Moten call “the monogamous violence of home”. I knew there was a world outside my windows, but they were shut tight. I had to throw them open somehow.

The year before I became queer, I had my first experience of becoming involved in a local grassroots campaign. After a lifetime of sitting on the sidelines, I finally joined in. I did it in part because a few months before I’d read *Hope in the Dark*, and it had moved me enough to jolt me out of my despair. The details are a story for another time, but suffice to say there was an element of secrecy to it: the organisation I worked for then would have been none too pleased about my getting involved. We were defending a public space from privatisation. We pushed hard for a few months, and when all hope seemed lost we actually won. The circumstances that allowed for our victory were complex, but one of my takeaways, one of the things I really hadn’t know before, was how much political struggle could feed the heart.

Our struggle happened in spring, as the days were getting longer. For weeks on end I woke up before my alarm clock every morning because I was too excited to sleep. It was like being in love. I’d sit at my laptop in the early morning, writing the day’s campaign e-mail, catching up on updates. I felt a deep sense of trust in the people I was co-struggling with. I trusted these strangers to keep secrets that might have cost me my job, my ability to feed myself and keep a roof over my head. I felt engaged, a part of the world. I hadn’t expected that—that it would touch my affective life so deeply. Here was proof that there was more to the scope of being human than I’d ever been able to imagine. When we won, I danced around in my living room to John Darnielle’s cover of “Power in a Union”, recorded in support of the 2011 Wisconsin strikes. I felt elated—as much as I had ever been by any private joy.

After that I wanted to understand that feeling, that deep joy in solidarity. I watched *Pride*. I watched *Free Angela and All Political Prisoners*, *The Black Power Mix-Tapes*, *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs*, the 2008

movie version of *A Raisin in the Sun*. I started reading about labour history and about the history of social movements more broadly. I read *Wobblies: A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World*. I read Howard Zinn. I went to see Naomi Shibah Nye in conversation with Mark Doty, and when she read her poem “Gate A-4” I was bowled over: “This is the world I want to live in. The shared world”. I went on marches. I joined a local anti-austerity group, but was put off by straight white cis men who assumed I knew nothing about capitalism and constantly talked over me. I tried to start a group of my own, but lost heart with my closest local friend and co-struggler moved away. Still, I didn’t forget what I’d felt. I didn’t forget what I’d learned.

I’d been circling around these ideas for so long. But without the language to frame them into the wider picture of my life, they hadn’t quite come into focus. A few months before I joined that grassroots campaign, I’d read *The Dispossessed*. It was during one of those heart-endangering Christmases at home; I had to renew my passport that year, and reading Le Guin while standing in line at the register office—of all places—I was struck speechless by lines like, “They think if people can possess enough things they will be content to live in prison. But I will not believe that. I want the walls down. I want solidarity, human solidarity”. The summer after that, I read Richard Wright’s *American Hunger* at the airport on my way to Chicago. That was the trip when it first happened, that stab of desire for my friend, but the longing I felt reading Wright is just as much a part of this story. My pulse quickened when I read,

I wanted a life in which there was a constant oneness of feeling with others, in which the basic emotions of life were shared, in which common memory formed a common past, in which collective hope reflected a national future. But I knew that no such thing was possible in my environment. The only ways in which I felt that my feelings could go outward without fear of rude rebuff or searing reprisal was in writing or reading, and to me they were ways of living.
(...)

I did not want to feel, like an animal in a jungle, that the whole world was alien and hostile. I did not want to make individual war or individual peace. So far I had managed to keep humanly alive through transfusions from books. In my concrete relations with others I had encountered nothing to encourage

me to believe in my feelings. It had been by denying what I saw with my eyes, disputing what I felt with my body, that I had managed to keep my identity intact. But it seemed to me that here at last in the realm of revolutionary expression was where Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role. Out of the magazines I read came a passionate call for the experiences of the disinherited, and there were none of the same lispings of the missionary in it. It did not say: "Be like us and we will like you, maybe." It said: "If you possess enough courage to speak out what you are, you will find that you are not alone." It urged life to believe in life.

The book goes on to chronicle Wright's disillusionment with the communist party; but, crucially, that first shock of hope and possibility stays with him. He doesn't retreat into cynicism—instead, he arrives at radical writing, which he describes as "building a bridge of words between me and the world outside":

I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.

"If an echo sounded, no matter how faintly". I cried when I first read that: the echo had reached me across space and time. It was a moment that prefigured my reading "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" in my kitchen this pandemic spring and knowing with growing certainty that I had to write this zine. Wright writes about radical politics in a way that highlights their affective quality. He writes about the joy and the heartbreak, and he doesn't shy away from the fact that our hearts are on the line.

As I work on this draft, the pandemic rages on. I've moved very from feeling grief-stricken and isolated from the world, from being stuck and unable to join in. These days I feel the call of solidarity deep in my bones. As spring turned into summer I followed the worldwide Black Lives Matters uprisings in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. I felt it resonate all around me: so much pain, so much hope, such a deep commitment to life and liveability for us all. George Floyd's name was graffitied onto the pedestrian bridge I cross on my walks, the one that leads to the park. Then it was painted over, then graffitied again. It moved me to see it

reappear, here in another continent, half a world away. Abolition has been in the air, with its immense promise of hope. It's been calling to me, and I don't want to sit on the sidelines anymore. I found an abolition study group to join over Zoom—real humans I hope to build a shared understanding with. I want to be with people, to talk about what we can do to bring this vision into practice, starting at the scale of our lives. The other day I woke up thinking about the word “liberation”. It used to sound nostalgic to my white middle-class ears, like the echo of an attempt at worldmaking I'd missed my chance to be a part of. It doesn't anymore: it's a living thing.

Back when I moved in mostly white liberal spaces, I used to watch people be demobilised by what strikes me now as a misplaced fear of appropriating one another's struggles. Over time, phrases like “stay in your lane” seemed to shift from a helpful reminder not to talk over others or fall into a white saviour mindset to a less than helpful appeal not to get involved in fights that weren't our own, in the narrowest possible sense of the term. What I was seeing wasn't so much what Prof. Ound calls “laneguarding”, whose “function is to make sure that those who are not aligned with a particular community's material interests/struggles do not dominate or ruin the process of resistance and radicalism such community members are involved in”. I think it was more of an emerging group culture where people who didn't necessarily belong to radical marginalised communities of struggle constantly scrutinized, shamed and policed one another. It led to a climate where we gave credence to the notion that demobilisation was, in fact, the most radical stance: where real solidarity became impossible; where vulnerability was unthinkable; where we always assumed bad faith. We were all terrified of getting it wrong and getting hurt, but we tried to dress up our fears in theoretical posturing. It was, though I didn't know it at the time, a culture deeply seeped in the carceral logic of disposability.

The other day Eva from my Pleasure Activism group shared this quote, collectively attributed to Aboriginal activist groups, Queensland, 1970s: “If you have come here to help me, then you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together”. In *The Undercommons*, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney say essentially the same:

The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?

Solidarity is realising I have a stake in this fight. Solidarity is love made manifest, and who ever knew that love could be so wide? This love doesn't have to be individual, though it is that too. But lately it's been important to me to remember it's also about (Moten and Harney again) believing in the world and wanting to be in it.

I care so much about love, individual love. I no longer see it as a weakness that friendship, love and intimate connections matter so much to me. I grew up with scarcity; I want more love in my life. But alongside this desire there's my realisation that the ideologies of romance and family are all about narrowing our imaginations in order to make love less vast. They're about locking us in rooms without any windows and throwing away the key.

On January 10 1995, Jane Rule wrote to Rick Bébout:

As I was doing the laundry this morning, I thought about your aversion to long-term relationship, making it central, if not everything, to the meaning of life, downgrading membership in the community to social distraction, limiting citizenship to an occasional vote, the smug inclusion/exclusion of friends at the edge of the hearth, subject to all domestic guidelines and limits. Children can be added to the equation simply as an extension of exclusiveness.

And on January 27 1995, Rick Bébout wrote back to Jane Rule:

It goes back to what I said about needing the world, caring about what it's like because you can't opt out of it; back to my critique not of coupledness, *per se*, but of the privatization of life, the absolution of responsibility for the wider world—not as an object of charity but as a place you live in and need to know works.

When I read this, I feel the joy and relief of lineage: here's a queer history that has been deeply engaged with the questions that are central to my life now for longer

than I've been myself. I'd just turned twelve when Jane Rule and Rick Bébout were exchanging these letters. And in 1982, before I was even born, Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh wrote *The Anti-Social Family*, a book deeply concerned with the experience of living in rooms without any windows. We live in a world, they explain, that encourages us

to form intimate one-to-one ties to the exclusion of a more diffuse bond to a wider group, a tendency to go it alone as an individual and a lack of concern for group support and approval or group interests.

A more diffuse bond that is nevertheless no less able to nourish our hearts. Nobody had ever told me that. Reading this book as a budding queer, I felt fireworks go off in my head. And there was more, so much more:

[The family] is indeed a place of intimacy, but in privileging the intimacy of close kin it has made the outside world cold and friendless, and made it harder to sustain relations of security and trust except with kin. Caring, sharing and loving would be more widespread if the family did not claim them for its own. (...)

The idea of love has a lot to answer for. In its name, people who are otherwise rational and socially perceptive walk as if spellbound into traps and prisons. (...) How often have people succumbed to the argument, 'if you really loved me you wouldn't mind marrying me, despite your theoretical and principled objection to marriage; what harm can a bit of paper do to a relationship between people? It only sets a seal on what we feel anyway'? Of course. But it also endows the relationship with respectability and social privilege and thereby devalues all other relationships. (...)

It is the belief that kinship, love and having nice things to eat are naturally and inevitably bound up together that makes it hard to imagine a world in which 'family' plays little part. This mythologised unit must be picked apart, strand by strand, so we can understand its power and meet the needs of each of its separate elements more fully. In part, this can be done by analysis and discussion, as we have tried to do here. But it must also be done by

experiments in new ways of living and by political campaigns to transform not the family—but the society that needs it.

(...)

If the family were not the only source of a range of satisfactions, were it not so massively privileged, it would not be so attractive. The needs and satisfactions to which we refer—affection, security, intimacy, sexual love, parenthood and so on—are not artificial. We see these as human needs, not pathological constructs. The form in which they are currently met, however, we regard as both unsatisfying and anti-social.

After I first read *The Anti-Social Family*, I wrote the following in my writing project notes: “I need to remember that yes! feeling I get when I read things like this—the feeling that tells me that yes, this is me, this is how I want to live. I need to listen to it when I’m at my most vulnerable and at my most irrational. It helps to know I’m not alone, that humans have been grappling with these questions for so long”.

What I meant is that I wanted to resist what Barrett and McIntosh call “famialism”: a tendency to hold on for dear life to whatever scraps of safety and belonging we can find, in ways that tend to “weaken rather than enrich [other] forms of community”. I’m not immune to this—I’ve watched it play out again and again in my life. I’ve been that person wanting to marry a beloved despite their—let alone my own—principled objections. A decade later, when I knew enough not to forget I didn’t really want to marry any of my beloveds, I moved on to wanting them to want to marry me.

More from my writing project notes: “My loneliness is political. Resisting famialism is political. Knowing this allows me to imagine other possibilities for my life, and to interrogate what I’ve been able to imagine so far”. And from my coming out letter to Kay: “So much of this has been about figuring out how I want to live. I want to be intertwined with the world. I want genuine and intimate relationships with other humans, whatever form they take. The one thing I know for sure is that I’m done trying to live up to a certain ideal of privatised couplehood. I need community, and queer culture has defined that in ways that feel truer to me than anything I’d found before”.

When I was little, my whole family slept in one bedroom. It wasn’t about poverty; we lived in a four bedroom house. The lurid details are outside the scope of

this zine—not because I’m trying to obfuscate the facts of my life, but because they’d add nothing to what I’m trying to write. I remember waking up in the middle of the night—I must have been about twelve—and lying in the dark listening to my parents and my brother breathe. I knew, even then, the awful cost of that kind of boundary elision: a small and narrow life; a confined and confused life. But lying awake in that crowded bedroom at night, I also felt at peace. I felt safe in the knowledge that everyone I loved, everyone I was allowed to love, was there with me in that room.

When I was sixteen we adopted a tabby. His name was Momo, and for the next decade and a half he was a steady source of small and miraculous daily joys. Momo liked cantaloupe and yoghurt. He’d stick his small head into my empty pots of yoghurt to try to lick them clean. Over time, he learned he could reach whatever was left at the bottom with his paw and then lick that off; watching him at it was a delight. He hated it when I whistled along to Owen Pallett’s “This is the Dream of Win and Regine”, so much so he’d meow incessantly in indignation. He didn’t mind whistling in general; it was just that one song. If I was home he’d sleep on me or around me for the better part of the day. His favourite position at night was tucked behind the curve of my knees, curled up against my legs. He loved my electric blue bean bag: he’d sleep for hours right in the middle, curled into a perfect round shape. He was born into a house with five children and spent his first few months there; he was always well-loved, always a people’s cat.

When I first started spending more time out of the country, as far away as I could get from my parents’ house, my cat didn’t take it well. He’d snub me for up to a week after I came back. But as I reached adulthood and my absences became longer and more frequent, he decided we’d be better off making the most of whatever time we had. We developed secure attachment. From then on, he’d greet me with unrestrained purring and lap-climbing from the moment I walked through the door.

He’s been gone a few years, but he’ll always be one of the greatest loves of my life. Because of my cat, I was able to know affection, trust and attunement during years of deep and continuous harm. My cat kept my heart soft. When Milton and I got together, one of the greatest joys of having him visit was being able to introduce them to each other. Despite his sociability Momo was wary with strangers, but he came to love and trust Milton as much as he did me. The first time Milton visited,

he stayed with us for a month. What was happening with my family during this time was unspeakable, a site of trauma I've yet to fully unspool. But even so, the day before he left I had the deep joy of watching Momo let him pet him for the first time.

Years later, when the horrors had ebbed, we used to spend the holidays at my parents' house. My cat slept with us in my bed; tucked between him and Milton on those midwinter nights, feeling him purr against my belly as I fell asleep, I felt so safe. I felt at home. I wanted to pause time. I thought that everything I ever wanted, everyone I cared about, was there with me in that room. But of course that feeling required a deadening. Expanding my circle of concern would have been entirely desirable. The other day, when I was reading the zine *Tough Mind, Soft Heart*, I came across this Sophie Scholl quote:

It's the reductionist approach to life: if you keep it small, you'll keep it under control. If you don't make any noise, the bogeyman won't find you. But it's all an illusion, because they die too, those people who roll up their spirits into tiny little balls so as to be safe.

I did that: I kept my life small. I rolled my spirit into a tiny ball. I didn't know it was possible to be open, to be permeable to the world, and still feel at ease.

In my early twenties, I lived in Nottingham for six months. Momo was mad at me for a full week when I came back. It was an expansive time, my first few steps towards becoming something that resembled a functional adult away from my family. That autumn and winter I saw and did and felt so much. I took a class on D.H. Lawrence and visited Eastwood on a crisp winter morning to see the country of his heart. I watched the deer at Wollaton Park and the squirrels on campus; I'd never seen squirrels before. I went to Beeston Library every week: it was where I borrowed and first read Ursula Le Guin's *Annals of the Western Shore*. I nearly cried on my first visit, much like I would at Bolerium Books over a decade later. So many books, so much possibility. When I had to move back home, I knew in all likelihood I wasn't going to live in Nottingham ever again. That simple knowledge tugged and tugged at my heart. I had a hard time saying goodbye. I wished, so badly, that I could patchwork all the places I'd ever loved into one, so that they'd always be close at hand. I wanted to make the world smaller. I felt almost compromised by having

allowed my heart to roam so far. There was no way, now, to cling to everything for dear life, to keep it safe and small. Like the narrator of Isherwood's *Prater Violet*, I felt that "perhaps I had travelled too much, left my heart in too many places".

It took me years to understand how this was the same impulse that ruled my mother's life. It was the small bedroom of my childhood and teenage years, the room without any windows. When I gave in to that feeling, I was giving in to a desire to be closed off to the world. I was giving in to the illusion that I had everything I needed, that there was no room for more. It was a capitalism of the heart, a diminishment, an antisocial severance—a life, to borrow Dean Spade's articulation, divested from solidarity. I don't want that after all. I don't buy into that sense of safety, that idea of home. I want to be implicated in the world. By now, draft six of this essay, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have blown by fucking mind:

Woodie Guthrie was a cosmic hobo, Coltrane was a cosmic hobo, so even if I could be something other than a cosmic hobo, I think what I'm gonna do is embrace homelessness for the possibilities that it bears, hard as that is, hard as they are. Homelessness is hard, no doubt about it. But, home is harder. And it's harder on you, and it's harder on every-god-damn-body else too. (...) Fuck a home in this world, if you think you have one.

The love and life I want are bigger than the walls of a room, bigger than a home, bigger than couplehood, bigger than family life. As Sophie Lewis writes,

What really matters to me (...) is the abolishment of the isolated privatization of human misery: the radical scarcity and overwork that is born of the logic of marriage and of family. I hope I am not being facetious when I say: I don't understand how a totally queered family could still be a family—or, at least, an exemplar of "the" family.

The other weekend I watched *Major!*, the Annalise Ophelia documentary about the life and work of Black transgender activist Miss Major Griffin-Gracy. It's a stunning film, where within the first few minutes you hear one of Miss Major's friends say,

There's been times when I went hungry and she brought over food for me, you know, she would go to the store and buy food. (...) And I would call Miss Major and she always picked up the phone when I called.

To always pick up the phone is the opposite of privatised misery, the opposite of my experience of family life. When I was little my parents always took the phone off the hook at night, the only exception being the rare occasions when my brother or I were allowed a sleepover at a friend's house. Anything else could wait, my mother used to say. The world at large could wait. We weren't tethered to anything or anyone outside our four walls.

In a world of white supremacist racial capitalism, of transphobia and heteropatriarchy, Black trans women and non-binary folks like Miss Major are not allowed the illusion of that small room, that privatised misery that calls itself family life. Instead, they keep one another alive. Because of whiteness, because I'm cisgender, because of the material shelter of a middle-class life, I did try to live within that illusion. But it was impoverishing, deadening, corrupting: it was killing me too, however much more softly. I needed out. I'm so moved by Miss Major's life and work, by this vision of a life where we all pick up the phone. A life where we care for one another, a life of radical solidarity. When I became queer, I was saying yes to all of this. To enlarge the circle, to always be widening the scope of my care: this is the work of my life. It's the only work that can save all our lives.

3. Attachment Femme

I'm felled by love.

In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Saidiya Hartman reimagines Mabel Hampton's first love affair, a short-lived relationship with a woman named Gladys that takes place when Mabel is seventeen years old. Hartman writes,

To be so vulnerable and utterly without defense was unbearable. It terrified her. What Mabel had wanted most—the embrace of a woman's loving arms, the press of flesh against flesh, the heat and mass of a lover's body rising beneath her, the pound of Gladys' racing heart echoing in her chest, the sticky knot of coiled limbs—it wrecked her. Not because she was an outcast, but because love drained and emptied her, making it impossible for her to stand on her own two feet without her lover.

(...)

When Gladys left, it didn't feel like the end of the affair, but the end of Mabel. What remained or who she might be was murky, uncertain. Could this bundle of feeling and impulse ever cohere into a person again? Ever manage to say "I" with any authority, or pretend to be the master of her sorry self? The ache of loving someone so unreservedly, so wholeheartedly, had nearly destroyed her.

I have been in this place. I've been wrecked not only by loss, but by love itself—by what I've wanted most. I have been undone. I've been a bundle of feeling and impulse who couldn't cohere into a person. I didn't like it—I wanted out.

In the early days of becoming queer, I stumbled upon Amber Hollibaugh by way of Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings*. Her writing blew my mind. She was the first in a lineage of femme foremothers I hadn't known I needed: someone who showed me models of possibly both in her politics and in her intimate experiences of gender, of sex, of being in relation. In "A Barren Expanse of Loneliness", written around the time I was born, Hollibaugh says:

I am profoundly alone most of the time; I feel trapped and caught inside myself. That another woman could release me, even for a minute, also reaches richer passions. Her breaking through my sexual isolation allows me to feel all

my feelings more vividly, gives me access to the best in my own abilities to reach a lover, to share and listen and roll back her loneliness with impulses that heal us both. I am, at that moment, capable of great love.

But that's the trick. Those feelings make me dependent and raw, wide open to any demand a lover might make. They shift my balance, make me compromise to avoid conflict, and seduce me into not struggling against any difference which comes up between us. I desire unity at any cost, sometimes at the expense of my own independence and needs. I am in a panic not to be walled in alone again. I feel my body to be without its own engine; I am plugged into her desire for me and cannot operate without it. I feel like a beggar, released from bondage for a moment but threatened with return to it if the relationship ends.

(...)

I do not like needing another person so deeply. I do not want to know how delicate and uncontrollable this loving another person can be, how little our promises can protect either of us or make it safe to play with these feelings we rouse inside each other.

"I feel my body to be without its own engine": I have been in this place, too. I'm starting with Amber Hollibaugh and Mabel Hampton by way of Saidiya Hartman in order to feel less alone. I don't want to write about this; I'm too ashamed. But my writing project notes did say, "Go where it hurts. Don't shy away from it". Later on they also say, without any context, "But don't divorce it from the structural". I'll try to follow my own lead, and listen to the gut feeling that tells me that if I dig a little deeper, I might find something here that's worth writing about.

After queerness, after kissing my friend outside King's Cross station, after the months of emotional turmoil that followed, I became a body without its own engine. I was not able to cohere into a person. I fell into a state of attachment crisis, though at the time I didn't have the language to understand it as such. For the next few years I was out of balance. I couldn't find my grounding, couldn't sleep through the night. I was anxious/preoccupied, and I didn't realise the problem was not only the anxious but also the preoccupied. All my life I'd thought that was just what love felt like. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "preoccupied", adj, as "engrossed in thought; mentally distracted; concerned, worried; characterized by mental

preoccupation". For a period of about two years, I was engrossed in panicked thoughts of losing my friend. I was distracted, concerned and worried. I moved into a room without any windows. I had little space for anything else.

Over time, I began to feel diminished. On the 28th January 2018, long before I read about Mabel Hampton, I wrote in my journal: "I've lost my way again. I've retreated back into my needy, diminished self. I have to find my way out of this—to be a whole person again". Then, on the 2nd February of the same year: "I'm trying not to be diminished by how much I miss her—not to let missing her be all that I feel and think and am". And on the 21st May: "I feel diminished by what I'm feeling right now". The cycle was exhausting. For months on end I was barely able to finish a book. One day that summer I went to Norwich to visit my friend Emma, and on the train ride there I got absorbed in Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*. It was the first time in who knows how long that thoughts other than my own filled my mind. Paradoxically, it reminded me of what it was like to feel like myself. I wasn't as "full to the brim of very me". I felt intense relief.

These feelings were all the harder to navigate because they were socially sanctioned up to a point. My friend and I were having hot, fun, intimate sex, and according to the cultural scripts of love and intimacy that's how you're supposed to feel about people you care about and are sexually involved with. It's hard to gauge, now, how much I actually bought into these myths. I'd been on the rollercoaster of attachment anxiety with people I had no desire to sleep with one time too many to buy into it wholesale. Still, I wasn't immune to this widespread tendency to romanticise preoccupation and call it being in love. I knew better, but it still had its pull. The cultural messages around it were ambiguous: on the one hand, preoccupation with a relationship that was this important to me was normalised. On the other hand, it was easy to feel sting of the shame that came from veering into the excessive, into the unseemly and pathological terrain of codependency.

What I was encouraged to be suspicious of wasn't necessarily what wasn't serving me well. It was difficult to disentangle the aspects of my experience that were pleasurable and benign—a softness, a somatic opening, a leaning into care, a wave of excitement I wanted to ride until it plateaued naturally—from the aspects that were diminishing me. When I say it was difficult, I really mean it was impossible: I was not in the least equipped to do it. I didn't have the resources. It wasn't something I could ever have done on my own.

My relationship with my friend was nonmonogamous and long-distance. It would be easy to point to either of these things as the reason for my state of permanent attachment crisis, but that wouldn't make it true. This isn't to say they had no bearing; they did, but there was far more going on. In time I began to notice that my panic and preoccupation weren't just triggered by my friend's absence or my unfulfilled longing: they were triggered by the satisfaction of my desire for intimacy, too. They sabotaged it even as it was happening. When I was deep in the grip of attachment crisis, I dehumanised my friend. The goalposts for what would make me feel safe shifted all the time. She was loving, yet love went through me as though my heart were a sieve. I was insatiable. It made for a dynamic that hurt her as much as it did me.

About eight months into this rollercoaster, the state of my heart was so unsustainable I knew I had to look for help. This was before I started my current job, and there really wasn't much I could afford. I started exploring NHS options for counselling, and discovered all I was eligible for were 30-minute telephone appointments every other week, up to a maximum of six sessions. It was almost comically insufficient, but even within this model of scarcity I lucked out. Before any of my bad experiences with private therapists, I found a counsellor who was genuinely helpful and unfailingly kind. We mostly talked in abstracts: I never talked about any of the details of my life. I never even came out to her. But I said enough that she started talking to me about attachment anxiety, and nudged me in the direction of some of the resources I needed. One day, between telephone sessions, she e-mailed me an article by Jeremy McAllister called "Own the Inner Child: Breaking Free of Anxious Attachment". It included a short section written in the form of a letter from someone on the receiving end of attachment anxiety that stopped me in my tracks:

I see your panic. I hear it in your breathing, your sighs, your many signs and gestures—the ones meant to elicit attention from me. I resent you in this mood because it means I lose a partner and gain a child. I become the parent. I become your "fix." In your panic, my existence is no longer mine. I'm no longer free, whole, separate from you. With nobody in you to meet me, I am trapped and alone.

Your dependence becomes a weight for me to carry. It's like a child in you with nowhere to go. Sometimes it feels like an insatiable bully, entitled, demanding I care for it. But it has no sense of time, and I could meet it for hours, resenting you each minute. And nothing changes.

I want to be loved, not needed.

Part of me also yearns to be taken care of.

I sent the article to my friend, and she told me she did recognise it: that feeling of being a “fix”, the knowledge that nothing she did could ever be enough, the sense of abandonment that came with that.

My friend was kind and tender, and she did try hard. She deserved better from me. “I want to be loved, not needed” reached something deep in me: it reminded me of her vulnerability. The year before this happened, I'd read *Conflict is Not Abuse*: Sarah Schulman's articulation of how when we react from a place of trauma we end up acting as though our feelings trump other people's had started to recalibrate something in me. I'd recognised that pattern, too. Intellectually, I had the tools. Sometimes I could even spot it as it was happening. But I was a long way away from being able to hold on to these insights when I was in deep distress. I didn't yet have the concept of embodied knowledge, or the ability to be patient with myself. So every time I failed, I felt hopeless. I went back to believing I was doomed.

The second time I visited my friend, a few months before my NHS counsellor sent me that article, we went to hear Eileen Myles read from the then newly launched *Afterglow*. They told a wonderful story about meeting Mary Oliver and Percy on a beach once: they'd exchanged pleasantries as fellow dog walkers, but Myles never introduced themselves as a fellow poet or as a reader of Oliver's work. “That would have ruined it”, they said. But this anecdote is almost the only thing I remember from the event: on our way there I'd had a moment of intense attachment anxiety, and as a result I was panicky and distracted. I was in a room with Eileen Myles and I barely even noticed it—that's how far removed I was from the world. It was such a loss. I'd wanted my friend to hold my hand and she'd said no. She told me it would make her anxious, and I felt pushed away. My snowballing anxiety left me agitated; it made me thoughtless and unkind. When my friend said no, it was an act of trust. Deep in the grip of my panic, I failed to honour it.

I want to tell this story with compassion for myself as well as compassion for her. I didn't know this at the time, but the handholding wasn't a need: it was a strategy to meet a need. My need was for touch as a path to co-regulation, to belonging, to ease: I wanted us to sit side by side and enjoy being at this wonderful queer event together. The heartbreaking thing is that we were, or we could have been, if only I could just breathe. My friend wanted that too. It was late October; it got dark early. On our way to the bookstore I'd veered us towards some kind of relationship conversation I was revisiting for the nth time, even though there was nothing new to say. I don't remember the specifics: only that what was really at the heart of it was my raw panic, my desperate ache to feel safe, my unquenchable search for reassurance. I wish I'd had the language, then, to understand it in terms of attachment crisis.

We stopped at a red traffic signal before crossing the road and continuing our climb uphill to the bookstore. I remember my friend's face in the glow of the red light: she looked so loving, so kind. I was picking at the same scab over and over again, stopping it from healing. I didn't know how to have these conversations in ways that weren't circular, so instead I returned to them all the more insistently the less there was to say. It made for a precarious foundation, I think: it might have set the stage for breakdowns in communication later on, when communication might have taken us somewhere new.

Earlier that week, my friend had taken me to Frenzy, a small comics and zine store she'd been telling me about for months. I'd been looking forward to going with her when I visited next, but once we were there I couldn't pay attention to anything. I got a small round fridge magnet with an illustration I liked, but I could barely even browse. I was agitated and hypervigilant, too narrowly focused on my friend. I was scrutinising her all the time for signs that she might be growing distant, for hints that she was pushing me away. That morning I'd woken up in her arms, and that evening she'd go to sleep in mine. She had given me so much. But I still couldn't calm down and be, which also meant that I couldn't let her be. My friend noticed—she's smart and perceptive and caring; of course she noticed—and it created a distance between us, the exact distance I feared. It wasn't easy on her. I'm condensing time as I write this, overlapping real-time moments with insights that took me years of hard work to reach. I didn't know any of this as it was happening,

and living through it with no frame of reference was murky and painful and hard. It confused us both.

These are all things that happened, and yet what I'm highlighting as I tell this story still leaves out so much. The role of the anxious, overly dependent lover is both one I've inhabited and a shoe that doesn't quite fit. Right now my friend and I are in a state of rupture, but it's important to me to note that these aren't lessons I learned because I lost her. I wanted to escape my needy, diminished self long before we became estranged. I wanted it for the sake of my values, for the sake of my own life. All along there had been glimpses of something good, of a way of loving that didn't cut me off from the world.

That second visit was probably the most difficult time we had together, but even then there were moments of relief. There was the day when we went to see *The Lavender Scare*, the documentary about Frank Kameny. It was showing as part of the local queer film festival; I met her one afternoon after work and we walked up the hill towards the theatre together. She'd left work early so she could come see the film with me, and when we met she gave me a chocolate she'd saved me from a box someone had brought into her office. That made me happy. As I sat beside her in the theatre I felt at ease, absorbed in the story of a giant of queer history I was encountering for the first time. I felt closest to her when I was less focused on her, when we were able to be in the world. I knew, even then, that I was more than my diminished self, that the world had more to offer, that there were other ways to live.

My friend introduced me to queer zines. When she first visited me she brought me copies of E.T. Russian's *Ring of Fire* and Frances Gregory's *Love is Not Enough*, both of which blew my mind. Later she mailed me issues of *Secondhand Emotion*. I wouldn't be writing this zine today if not for her—this is a simple truth, but one that runs so deep. I also wouldn't be writing it without Marian, without Diana, without my Pleasure Activism group: as much as I've struggled with unheldness, there are moments when it hits me that I do have the starts of a network of distributed dependencies.

All the same, I miss my friend. I feel a pang when I think of her. I think our estrangement will always be a wound. The day we went to the Dyke March—the day of the pelicans on Ocean Beach—we commented on a sign we spotted as we were marching away from Dolores Park. Someone was holding it from one of the balconies overlooking 18th Street; it said “Viva La Vulva”. We were compelled not by

the message, too focused on biology to rank among our favourites, but by the energy of the old lady behind it, dancing and waving as the marchers went past. The other evening, when I was watching the movie version of *Valencia*, there was a shot of the Dyke March where you could see that same sign on the same balcony. I was delighted to discover it was a yearly tradition. I wished so much that I could tell me friend.

My grief is still raw, but when I think back to how I felt earlier this spring I notice it's no longer so laced with shame. These days I'm less likely to want to hide from the world and more likely to think about a tweet by @RegretRemember about *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*:

When someone contributes to changing your way of seeing the world, your instinct is to believe the lack of that person implies losing it all. But in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Céline Sciamma says no, your life is forever changed and nothing is really lost. Love is constructive.

I'm more likely to think about my favourite lines from Joanna Newsom's "Time, as a Symptom":

The moment of your greatest joy sustains:
not axe nor hammer
tumor, tremor
can take it away, and it remains.
It remains.

Or about Ashon T. Crawley, writing in the New Inquiry:

So it's not so much silence as it is the ghost, the ghosting, of severed connection, a renunciation of the possible in the service of the coherence of normativity. Such ghosting is the presence of loss.

The place and practice of ghosts might be the affective space and register in which queer desire is formed.

I wonder whether the narrative I've constructed so far makes it sound like I'm telling a story about awakening to solidarity but having that awakening be interrupted by a relationship—by the concerns of private life. The truth feels messier, less narratively satisfying. Yet in a way it also feels simpler, now that I have the language to articulate it differently. For years I carried around a history of trauma that was activated by intimacy. Because of this, I couldn't be present in my life in the ways I would have liked: not in my relationships, not in my writing, not in my becoming, not in how I lived my politics. But my takeaway from all of this is not that I shouldn't love with abandon or that I ought to protect my heart. It's the opposite: I can love as deeply as I love my friend and still be in the world. I can love by an open window; love without being diminished by a permanent sense of emergency; love with solidarity and from within an expansive circle of care.

Let me tell you how I came to this clarity. There have been a few instances in my life when I've read something and have felt it abruptly rearrange my inner landscape, the very molecules of who I am. Books have built me, but the process is usually slow and cumulative. Still, I treasure my handful of memories of feeling it happen in real time. One is of course reading Virginia Woolf's Shakespeare's sister excerpt from *A Room of One's Own* in class. Another is reading *Tiny Beautiful Things* and realising I wanted to embrace, not curb, the most generous impulses of my heart. It also happened when I read Martha Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought* over a long Easter weekend and it recalibrated my understanding of human need and shame; or when I picked up *Conflict is Not Abuse* and saw my history of trauma in a new light. And it happened when I read Clementine Morrigan's *Love Without Emergency* one Saturday morning in bed last winter.

I didn't think it was possible for something I hadn't written myself to paint such a clear picture of the last few years of my life. But even more important than the shock of recognition was the depth of compassion and hope I found in this zine. Morrigan addresses the shame that surrounds discussions of attachment wounds, even in—or sometimes especially in—radical queer and nonmonogamous communities. Responding to these wounds with shame, Morrigan says, is like pouring gasoline into a fire. Their writing also confirmed something I'd already sensed: none of this is inevitable. It doesn't have to be this way. Healing is possible, which doesn't mean it isn't hard. She writes,

‘Jealousy’ does not do justice to the extreme embodied distress that people can feel when they are traumatized and/or attachment injured and trying to navigate polyamory. Trauma and attachment injuries are embodied experiences, not simply cognitive ones, and they require and deserve a compassionate response. Normalizing the fact that this shit is hard and can be really painful goes a long way in creating the space we need for healing.

I’m trying to resist the urge to quote from *Love Without Emergency* excessively. Reading this zine (*the zine*, as my Pleasure Activism group has come to call it lovingly) was beyond transformative. It made me feel that my existence was possible after all: that I could be me, with my history and my politics and my trauma and my deep-seated wounds, and still continue to move towards living in accordance with my values. It made me feel I could cohere into a person, that my body could have its own engine, that I could be myself and still belong.

It helped me understand, among other things, that much of my panic around abandonment and disposability was inextricable from my identity as a femme. During those years of constant attachment panic, I was most intensely afraid of the possibility of my masc of centre beloved becoming involved with other femmes. This felt unsayable for so long. *Love Without Emergency* helped me understand this fear isn’t just a personal feeling that exists in a vacuum: it’s the result of a particular set of social and political conditions that have forged the hidden crevices of my heart. Morrigan says,

Acknowledging that I live in a culture that pits me against other women/femmes, that defines my value through my desirability, helps to contextualize my anger. And honestly, this culture which treats women/femmes in this way is a reason to be angry. And it’s not just like a personal thing to transcend and overcome but something that is beyond us that we deal with as best we can.

It was immensely helpful to see that this could be put into words without the result being annihilation or exile. Perhaps it’s possible to say this and be met with kindness instead of being called out as a fraud for not being queer enough, feminist enough, politicised enough. That feeling of panic at the possibility that I might be

disposable is embodied: it isn't something I can change overnight or reason my way out of. And yet knowing this does help. It helps to make this link to the political and the structural explicitly, to sit with these truths with as much self-compassion as I can muster. It helps to know that while this feeling has deep roots, it isn't righteous or sacrosanct. This knowledge does actually open up a space where I can begin to dislodge it.

It's been so good to have the language to think through this, to discuss it with others. When we finished *Pleasure Activism*, my group discussed *Love Without Emergency* over three Sunday evenings. The conversations we had were like a dream come true. Even now, writing these words, I can hardly believe I found these people. The "parity of vulnerabilities" we experience together, as Hazel so aptly put it, opens up possibilities for so much healing. I felt so connected, so held. This healing hasn't been linear: my days of *Riverdale* shame, for example, happened months after I'd first read the zine. Even knowing what I knew I still sunk back into a simple story. But I think the resources I had made it easier to climb my way back out. The work isn't finished; it all likelihood it never will be. But I'm getting better at navigating it day by day.

That Saturday morning in bed last winter, I could feel my heart begin to mend. I could feel the shift as I read passages like,

I am used to hyper vigilantly scanning for threat. I am used to being on guard for abandonment or attack. I expect to be hurt and betrayed, even when I don't expect these things with my rational mind, I expect them with my body. I read and reread into things, looking for signs of danger. I pay close attention to body language, punctuation use, minor fluctuations in attention. I am used to feeling really stressed out by love.

Or:

So many people feel literally crazy and desperate and panicked about love. So many of us keep exploding our relationships out of this place of desperate terror, creating the very thing we are so afraid of.

Or, later on, the simple clarity of this:

I have an anxious preoccupied attachment style, mixed up with complex ptsd. This means that love and intimacy are extremely activating for me. It means that my nervous system gets super hijacked, that I'm always on the lookout for abandonment and betrayal, that I deeply and viscerally do not feel safe in love, even when I actually am safe.

There is a way out of this cycle. There is a way to find and rest in the feeling of safety. There is even a way to feel safe and secure in love if you practice relationship styles like polyamory and non-hierarchical polyamory.

I know how much this clarity is hard-won. What would have happened, I wonder, if I'd known this the day my friend took me to Frenzy, or the day we went to see Eileen Myles? What would have been different if someone had sat down with me and explained this with kindness, with patience, without pouring gasoline into the fire? I think the answer might be "everything".

Morrigan also says, "Be kind to yourself. These are deep wounds being activated and they are compounded by a culture that insists on a very limited imagining of what love can be". Breaking away from this very limited imagining, from the room without any windows, has been an essential part of this process. If things are different now, it's not only because I've learned strategies to calm down my nervous system during moments of attachment crisis. It's also because I've realised there are many places in the world where I can look for the belonging I crave.

Before I lost my friend, we had a good few months. I think we had a taste of a love with less emergency, with a steady equilibrium, even if it was built on a weak foundation that would eventually crumble. That spring and summer, I was reading again. I was sleeping through the night. I visited Emma for the weekend, stayed with Aisha for a few days, went to London to see Hand Habits, started listening to *Queery* and *Making Gay History* and *Mattachine*. I thought about writing all the time. I saw Michael often. I made plans for a solo trip to Amsterdam in September. I watched *Steven Universe* and *Gentleman Jack* and planned my first tattoo. More and more I kept it together and didn't catastrophise if I reached out to my friend and she didn't reply for a few days. Not all the time, but much of the time, and

eventually most of the time. I had room for other thoughts: I wasn't as preoccupied. I think she felt that ease, too. She sought me out more and seemed more relaxed. There was more delight between us. We shared a lot of joy.

Those few months of steadiness taught me more than all my years of suffering. I hadn't read *Love Without Emergency* yet, but I did have some context for what was going on. After my six sessions with that NHS counsellor, I'd done more reading on attachment theory. I knew about the avoidant-anxious trap my friend and I periodically fell into. I knew that when anxiety loosened its grip, the resulting ease actually brought us closer together. We were able to delight in each other's company, and that joy was how I learned security. Just as importantly, I had the context of my relationship with Milton. Despite our ongoing issues, over the course of fourteen years I did come to feel secure. I knew sometimes time did its work. I knew about interdependence, and I believed in it. I knew I could break the cycle without having to buy into any of the capitalist myths of individualism. I didn't resent the idea of relying on other people for my emotional wellbeing; I just wanted to learn to do it sustainably, distributedly, without something in me short-circuiting in the process and without putting too much on any one person.

I also knew that when I was scared I had—have?—a tendency to look for refuge in the normative. Two years ago I wrote in my writing notes, “I find that in my most vulnerable moments I default to normative imaginings out of fear and a desperate wish for certainty, but it's been good to step away from that”. Reading about generative somatics helped me understand that this isn't because I don't actually believe in my values, or because my commitment is only superficial. It's just a very common thing that frightened human beings do: we look for familiarity, for predictability. Unfortunately we don't yet live in a world where expansive visions of abundant and secure love look familiar. It helps so much to see other people write and talk about this without shame. It mattered to me that Barrett and McIntosh wrote, in *The Anti-Social Family*, “These are normal longings of the heart”. The problem wasn't the fact that I wasn't independent enough, that I wanted safety or belonging: it was having a too-narrow vision of how I might be able to find them, and of what they might look like once I did.

I think there might have been something else at play: I wanted these experiences of the heart, these loves that mattered so much to me, to be intelligible, to be recognisable, to belong to the wider narrative currents of the world. I wanted

to be able to tell my friends about these feelings that made my heart swell up so much I thought it was going to explode without having them be instantly suspicious, or try to channel them into their most socially acceptable format. I wanted to share my joys and sorrows, both small and large. I wanted people to know what I meant when I said I loved my friend. Not everyone was kind about our queer nonmonogamous love. This suspicion threw me off balance: I didn't yet have enough models of possibility to be able to imagine how this love might exist in the margins, outside widespread forms of recognition like couplehood or romance.

Before everything went bust with my friend, I spent years really grappling with this. I thought a lot about my craving for certainty and predictability. In my moments of most acute attachment crisis, I didn't just want our relationship to have a less queer and more recognisable shape, one that was in truth less aligned with my values. I also wanted to know the shape of each moment before it came. In the early days, I planned our visits in too much detail. I'd get overly attached to the idea of our doing something together: I'd invest it with so much symbolic meaning that when the moment came it inevitably fell short. Going to Frenzy was like that.

As before, finding texts to think with helped a lot. In *Missing Out*, Adam Philips talks about "not imagining things too precisely", a sentence I wrote in my journal over and over again. I was starting to think about queer life as a life of possibility, and about possibility as inseparable from uncertainty. This, too, was a form of queer living, of queer world-making. I still had so much capacity-building to do when it came to sitting with uncertainty. But I worked at it, slowly and painfully, and little by little I felt it change me. I could feel, in Marge Piercy's perfect imagery, this work "[stretching] the muscles that feel / as if they are made of wet plaster / then of blunt knives, then / of sharp knives".

All along I had an inkling of what might feel right. Reading old journal entries I can see two threads: one shows that for a few years I really did lose my way; the other shows how easy it would be to overestimate the degree to which I lost my way. Even in my most desperate entries I can still see it, the steady core of me. My journals show that my deep desire to align my life with my values was there all along. I find that hope-giving: it does me good to realise I can trust myself after all. On the 5th December 2017, during a period I remember as one of acute crisis, I wrote in my journal:

When the path ahead is fully mapped out and there's no chance of deviation, you're robbed of that [possibility]. I don't want to be robbed of it, and I certainly don't want the people I love to be either. I don't want us to live small lives that are dominated by fear. And maybe, just maybe, that means becoming comfortable with not knowing what lies ahead, and not allowing that uncertainty to rob me of what's real right now. Maybe it means going beyond making peace with uncertainty and actually befriending it. Maybe I've known this all along, but need to be reminded from time to time. Maybe it will be immensely freeing if I stop trying to map out my own future experiences so precisely. Maybe there is possibility right now, simply because I'm alive.

And on the 1st February 2018:

I'm tired of this being all there is to my thoughts lately. I'm tired of scarcity driving my focus. It's claustrophobic; it's the room without any windows. I want more. I'm going to read Sara Ahmed and think about how to live.

I remember writing that entry: I was visiting my parents for the week. On that visit I spent time with their cats and dog, saw my friend Diana, and did read Sara Ahmed and thought about how to live. *Living a Feminist Life* gave me another precious phrase I repeated often in my journals: "the queer wanderings of a life you live". It also gave me passages such as this:

I do not think it is good to be too confident in one's decisions and, thus, be too confident in the shape of the life you live, a life that has acquired its shape because of decisions you have already made along the way. I think it is good to think of life as always potentially in crisis, to keep asking the question: how to live?

(...)

When I go for a walk without knowing where I am going, I call it a hap walk. To affirm hap is to follow a queer route: you are not sure which way you are going; maybe you let your feet decide for you. You can be redirected by what you encounter along the way as you are not rushing ahead, rushing forward, to get somewhere. You wander, haphazardly at times, but then you might

acquire a sense of purpose because of what you find on the way. How we take a walk is not unrelated to how we live a life. To proceed without assuming there is a right direction is to proceed differently. To say life does not have to be like this, to have this shape or this direction, is to make room for hap.

Winter turned into spring. I visited my friend again, for the first time since the Frenzy and Eileen Myles visit. The week before the trip I read Rachel Hartman's astonishing *Tess of the Road*; I drew a sharp breath when I read sentences such as, "Tess marvelled that she could feel so hurt and comforted at once, so empty and full. Hers was a life lived in joy-*utl*, and she was capable and capacious enough to endure it". That visit was infinitely better: freer, looser, not so precisely imagined. Janelle Monáe had just given the world the precious gift that was *Dirty Computer*, and on the inside cover of my travel journal I wrote the line, "Getting lost in the dark is my favourite part".

On that trip my friend and I went to see Alexander Chee and Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore in conversation for the launch of *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*. In some ways, that evening was the reverse of Eileen Myles. I was not distracted: I noticed, I paid attention, I was there. We got to the venue a little late, and Mattilda smiled at me and said hello as we walked in. It absolutely made my day. We stood at the back, leaning against the wall, two of many queer bodies in the mostly queer crowd. I felt light and present and joyous; I think my friend did too. Afterwards we walked home together in the spring twilight, past the blooming magnolias, and talked about how great the event had been. We were both taken with Alexander Chee's reading of the opening of his essay "Girl", about doing drag for the first time. I was leaving in two days' time; goodbyes always tug at my heart, but right then I felt at ease. There was nothing our evening was required to be except exactly what it was.

I was starting to think about what the most joyous moments of my life had in common, and have been thinking about it ever since. I think it's a twinning of possibility with a sense of being present, of being in and of the world. They're moments when I'm able to feel connected, content, and open to the unexpected. Sometimes I'm on my own, but I don't feel separate from the world. Other times these moments are shared, but the sharing doesn't require me to give up my

interiority. I'm able to be present with both myself and those around me, without anything being lost in the balance.

One bright early autumn day in Reims, France, when I was on the verge of veering towards the path that would eventually lead me to queerness, a fellow human being was enormously kind to me on a bridge. This is a transformative story whose details belong elsewhere, but what does belong in this zine is how I felt in the days that followed. I had a few hours to kill before my train the next morning, and I wandered around on my own in this small French town in a daze of delight. The sun was shining again, and I noticed the apples on a market stall, watched two dogs play in the sunshine, smiled at people who crossed my path. I was wide open to the abundance of the world, and noticing these things nearly moved me to tears. It was like the *there* passage in *Tess of the Road*, which some two years later I'd read and copy into my journal:

Her head nested in spindly weeds; beyond them the sky glowed preternaturally blue through the slats. As her chewing slowed, she noticed a bee crawling along a blade of grass above her head. She counted its stripes, amazed to see them juxtaposed with the stripes of the sky. The bee's were a warning, the sky's a promise she could not yet phantom, and for a moment everything seemed connected, aching beauty and imminent danger, the fragility of the bee and the scalded roof of her mouth, the transcendent savor of bread and the fact that she was literally lying in a ditch.

The moment made such a deep impression that she never forgot it, but she couldn't explain it except with the single word: *there*. She was there. Present in herself. She wasn't always, so it was worth remarking upon.

Years after Reims, and a few weeks after I'd first read *Tess of the Road*, my friend and I spend a weekend in Vancouver. On the Saturday we went to the aquarium, and I had one of those moment in front of an enormous tank of jellyfish. As I watched them swim around in the semi-darkness, I felt both present in myself and freed from the too-narrow confines of my individuality. I felt connected enough to my friend that I didn't need to make sure she was there. I felt securely attached to the world at large. I was stunned by the beauty of the jellyfish, the beauty of the

world. I remembered Tess and her bee and I thought to myself: *there*. When I tried to describe this moment to my friend Dan the other week, on the day I got a jellyfish tattooed on my arm, he suggested the phrase “existential delight”.

I had a lot of other *there* moments during the days I spent in San Francisco on my own around the 50th anniversary of Stonewall. I went for a lot of hap walks. The day I arrived I walked from the Sunset District to Green Apple Books, where I found a secondhand copy of Dorothy Allison’s *Skin*. Then I more or less accidentally made my way back along Ocean Beach in the early evening sunshine. The quality of the light that evening is something I think I’ll remember until the day I die: it’s a moment of joy that has sustained me ever since. It remains, as Joanna Newsom sings. It has remained.

On June 28th 2019, a few hours before my visit to Bolerium books, I watched a documentary at the Castro theatre as part of that year’s Frameline programme. The film, *State of Pride*, included footage of Sylvia Rivera’s famous speech at the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally. This is the speech where she says,

Y’all better quiet down. I’ve been trying to get up here all day for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail that write me every motherfucking week and ask for your help and you all don’t do a goddamn thing for them. Have you ever been beaten up and raped and jailed? Now think about it. They’ve been beaten up and raped after they’ve had to spend much of their money in jail to get their hormones, and try to get their sex changes. The women have tried to fight for their sex changes or to become women. On the women’s liberation and they write ‘STAR,’ not to the women’s groups, they do not write women, they do not write men, they write ‘STAR’ because we’re trying to do something for them.

I have been to jail. I have been raped. And beaten. Many times! By men, heterosexual men that do not belong in the homosexual shelter. But, do you do anything for me? No. You tell me to go and hide my tail between my legs. I will not put up with this shit. I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation and you all treat me this way? What the fuck’s wrong with you all? Think about that!

The speech is even more powerful when you watch the actual footage. I've encountered it again several times since, but that day at the Castro theatre I was watching it for the first time. Sylvia Rivera's delivery is deeply felt, and in the background you can hear the booing of the crowd. I was floored. I was so moved by her humanity, by her no holds barred vision of what it means to live lives of radical solidarity. I wished so much that her words had been received differently. I was moved, too, that I was watching it in a theatre full of fellow queers on the 50th anniversary of Stonewall. I didn't know this yet, at least not in these terms, but I was moved by a vision of abolition, which Sylvia Rivera connects firmly to queer liberation. Once you've seen it, this link cannot be unseen. The booing in the film was almost drowned by the real-life cheers of the queer crowd around me, and that also felt important, that moved me too.

I know there are many "buts". We were watching that movie in the middle of the day in a gentrified neighbourhood in a gentrified city. My life, and likely the lives of many of the people around me, fell short of Sylvia Rivera's vision in so many ways. But the cheering acknowledged that she was right, that she had been right all along. It pointed towards the fact that it's not too late to realise her vision of solidarity. I don't want to hide behind the "buts" when I tell you how much that moment moved me. I don't want to take refuge in cynicism or try to protect my heart. Cheering for Sylvia Rivera alongside a crowd of fellow queers on that day of all days helped restore my belief in solidarity.

A few days before that, before I left for San Francisco, my friend and I went to see the stage adaptation of *Tiny Beautiful Things*. There's a moment towards the end of the play when Sugar is telling a bereaved father who's lost his son about the day her mother died. She's remembering how the last word her mother ever said to her was "love"—said by way of goodbye, when she was too weak to articulate the full "I love you". She thought she'd see her mother alive at least one more time, but she was late getting to the hospital the day she died. Near the end of the scene she says, "These things have been my becoming".

Sitting next to my friend in that theatre, I remembered first reading those words in the book many years before. I remembered being so moved that years later I gave my copy away to a kind human being on a bridge in France. The reverberations of that moment are a zine of their own, but suffice to say that they

catapulted me here. They resulted in my heart bursting open, in my going to America the following summer, in the final push towards my becoming queer. They led to all the joy and rightness that has since followed, to all the sorrow and loss, to grappling with my history of trauma, to asking myself, again, serious questions about how I want to live. They led to being able to listen for different answers. And they led me to that theatre on a Sunday afternoon, where I was watching the play alongside my friend.

Each one of those brief, amazing movements really did make possible the next. I thought about how if Cheryl Strayed's mother hadn't died of cancer and she hadn't written *Tiny Beautiful Things*, the course of my life would have been radically different. I certainly wouldn't be sitting next to my friend that afternoon. The realisation felt profound. It wasn't, I don't think, a facile thought about a stranger's death and suffering and another stranger's grief being worthwhile because they'd improved my life. It was a moment of deep awareness of the far-reaching ripple effects of a human life, and how profoundly and unexpectedly it has touched my own. I felt deep in my bones that we're all embedded in a web of life, tied together in our common humanity, far more deeply than we normally realise. I saw, like Tess, that everything was connected. It moved me so much that I was breathless, speechless, heartbroken, elated. I was overjoyed and I was overwhelmed.

The following day, when my friend was at work, I sat in her apartment with her cats and wrote about that moment in my travel journal. I cried as I tried to put it into words, in a way that made me feel alive and made my heart feel full. At the time I wrote that what had happened that afternoon had been the standout moment of the trip—a trip full of moments of abundant, luminous, joyful and life-giving intimacy. I wrote it not to disavow those intimate moments with my friend or to deceive myself into thinking I no longer valued them, but because it mattered that I was able to find such heart-nourishment in an experience so rooted in my own interiority. I couldn't have done that before.

I didn't tell my friend about this until many months later, when I put it in a letter I sent her after we'd already become estranged. I didn't tell her at the time not because I couldn't, but exactly because I knew I could. I felt close to her, and so comfortable in that closeness that it didn't much matter when I brought it up. There was no panic-fuelled sense of emergency, no need to check whether we were in fact still close. I was at ease, and so I could simply feel and be. This kind of effortless

camaraderie alongside an enjoyment of my inner life has not been within my reach for most of my life. It's one of the things I've been robbed of by the legacy of trauma, but I think I need it in order to feel whole.

These memories—Reims, the jellyfish, the evening light on Ocean Beach, Sylvia's speech, *Tiny Beautiful Things*—stand out as peak experiences, as pinnacles of joy. Except what I felt then was more complicated than joy: it was joy-*utl*, *there*, heartache, engagement with the world. It was, to put it simply, a sense of being alive. It matters that none of them were about privatised couplehood or the recognisable markers on a well mapped-out life. They weren't about certainty or permanence or control. They were all, each in their own ways, profoundly queer moment.

It hasn't always been clear to me that my craving for certainty was an act of clutching, of holding on for dear life: that it was another manifestation of anxious/preoccupied attachment. Much like what I said earlier about hyperfocusing on love, it doesn't help that this is culturally sanctioned up to a point, after which it's pathologised. As I tried to move beyond these patterns, I also began to think about what there was in all of this that I might want to keep. Sara Ahmed gave me a possible answer through her vision of "hap care":

Perhaps we can think of care in relation to hap. We are often assumed to be careless when we break something, as I noted in chapter 7. What would it mean to care for something, whether or not it breaks? Maybe we can reorientate caring from caring for someone's happiness to caring what happens to someone or something; caring about what happens, caring whatever happens. We might call this a hap care rather than a happiness care. A hap care would not be about letting an object go, but holding on to an object by letting oneself go, giving oneself over to something that is not one's own. A hap care would not seek to eliminate anxiety from care; it could even be described as care for the hap. Caring is anxious—to be full of care, to be careful, is to take care of things by becoming anxious about their future, where the future is embodied in the fragility of an object whose persistence matters. Our care would pick up the pieces of a shattered pot. Our care would not turn the thing into a memorial, but value each piece; shattering as the beginning of another story.

I realised I wanted that, and want that still: to care about what happens, to care whatever happens. I don't want to refuse to allow things or people to matter to me, or to resist loving with abandon. I don't want to see my beloveds as disposable because there will always be someone else who could meet my needs. As much as the latter may be true, I also want to carry on loving my friends as individuals and to accept that I'm not impervious to grief. I found plenty of encouragement to withdraw from care, to become withholding and detached, to protect my heart; I could have leaned into that if I wanted to, but I found that I did not want to. I held on stubbornly to Leslie Jamison's "I want our hearts to be open". I listened to Sufjan's "Vesuvius" over and over again. I continued to follow my heart, even as I fell on the floor. I began to embrace the softness in my version of femme. I was once again buoyed by Clementine Morrigan, who writes in "Love Letter to the Anxious Preoccupieds":

Your love is powerful and brave, the depth and capacity of your feeling is a beautiful and good thing. You don't have to hate yourself for it. And you don't have to feel the way you've been feeling. Your deep capacity for love can transform from a source of panic to a source of strength.

Boundary damage has made it hard to figure out which aspects of my tendency to give myself over to love I might want to salvage. I haven't always been able to disentangle what's in synch with my vision of a life of radical care from what might be the comforting familiarity of harmful patterns of self-neglect. And if I think about it carefully, I can see that there's another layer to this tangle: a misogyny-soaked contempt for what I'd come to feel were perhaps the best parts of me. I often felt I was being encouraged to throw the baby out with the bathwater. As a cisgender and femme-presenting woman, I felt that my desire to centre care was simultaneously compulsory and looked down upon, wrapped in thick layers of shame and reproach. I spent years trying to navigate these conflicting messages; I think I'm trying still.

Many years ago, when I first read Carol Tavris' *The Mismeasure of Women*, I became obsessed with the phrase "But the point is to direct our attention to the straitjacket, not its dutiful wearer". I quoted it at every opportunity: it was a

welcome respite from the blame I often saw directed at women deemed insufficiently assertive, women found not to be “leaning in”. Often this included those of us who didn’t equate feminist empowerment with embodying the values of cutthroat individualism, those of us who stayed soft. I was particularly struck by a chapter titled “Misdiagnosing the Mind”, where Tavris challenges the notion of “codependency”. She draws our attention to the fact that what is perceived as stereotypically feminine behaviour is pathologised to a much larger extent than stereotypically masculine behaviour. I’d always felt uneasy with the term “codependent”, so reading this was a relief. I hope I’m not being dismissive—I don’t want to devalue any framework that may have been helpful to others. But more often than not, “codependent” struck me as a stick used to beat women and femmes who practiced care while ignoring the circumstances that might make it difficult for us to set healthy boundaries around that care.

At the start of the pandemic I also read Nora Samaran’s *Turn This World Inside Out: The Emergence of Nurturance Culture*, which helped me sharpen my understanding of this cultural dynamic:

It becomes all too easy in a patriarchal culture that values rugged individualism over interdependence to call an anxiously attached woman “crazy,” without noticing the parallel avoidant responses that are contributing, that are legitimately distressing, and that are, arguably, just as much an effect of mental health issues as is anxious attachment. In other words, it takes two to enter into the avoidant-anxious trap, but patriarchal culture normalizes an avoidant style and stigmatizes an anxious style, wherever they appear. None of this is worthy of shame. Fundamentally, all of the insecure styles are based in an unquestioned belief that people will not be there and that nurturance is somehow a problem rather than wholly desirable and good. Avoidant attachers “know” from an early age that the ice will break, the chair will collapse—best not to try. Insecure attachment styles are not chosen, are not conscious or intentional, and it is an understatement to say they are not easy to change. They deserve understanding, compassion, and empathy. And yet, living without loving and secure attachments can be the loneliest experience in the human repertoire.

This is also about the feminisation of care work. Nurturance and interdependence are devalued because they're feminised; they're feminised because they're perceived as valueless. I think perhaps we also layer them with shame to neutralise the threat they pose: they challenge the myths that underpin capitalism, and therefore have the potential to transform everything. A world in which we all practiced care would be an unrecognisable world.

I hope everything I've written so far has provided some context for what I'm trying to say. I know that anxious/preoccupied attachment has not served me well. But I want to resist solutions that try to push me too far the other way: I don't want to overcompensate by moving towards a masculinised and white supremacist vision of independence and detachment. The links between this and binary and essentialist understandings of gender also make for complicated terrain. I can see how the shame directed towards care work is fuelled by misogyny, and yet at the same time I resent the narratives of gender essentialism that frame it as every woman's destiny and beyond every man's reach. Non-binary folks are of course rendered invisible by this framework. To go back to Tavris, she also says,

By relegating to women's nature what ought to be the human qualities of feeling, attachment, connection, and care, we overlook men's capacity for these qualities or absolve them of responsibility for not demonstrating them. We will all do better to specify what it will take for men to become more related or connected (or to admit that they already are!) than to dismiss them as hopelessly lacking this 'female' skill. "The more we continue to glory women's 'special' nurturing and caretaking abilities as a 'separate but equal' line of development," says Harriet Lerner, "the less likely it is that men will be able to recognise their own competences in this arena."

I'm less concerned with men specifically than I am with how this affects us all—though in a widening vision of solidarity, I'm also concerned with men. The devaluing of these essentialised "female" skills has devastating consequences for everyone. Even after developing a feminist consciousness, it took me a long time to be able to say, without hiding or shame, that I am tender, that I'm nurturing, that I prioritise staying connected and that I choose to commit to care.

I'm finding it difficult to write about this, because what I'm trying to describe is a double bind. For example, during the months when things were at their ugliest with Milton, I'd often meet up with my friend Michael for dinner. I vented a lot during those dinners, probably more than I should have done—not because it's wrong, as white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism would have us believe, to share the intimate details of our lives with those outside the sphere of family or couplehood, but because despite all his empathy Michael was not the right person to be having those conversations with. I needed someone I could check my perception of reality with, but our relationship lacked the necessary depth. Michael didn't have enough context to reflect the intricacies of my life back with any degree of accuracy. The more I developed that depth in my friendships with Marian and Diana, the more I noticed the difference.

Michael, who I care about dearly, offered me a lot of support whenever I expressed a willingness, born out of frustration, to completely sever my connection with Milton. To me those were moments of profound despair, moments when I could see no way forward. It broke my heart to even consider such a drastic step. Michael would always tell me how liberating it would be to fully detach from a former partner whose presence in my life was not, at that moment in time, a source of sustenance to me. He repeatedly encouraged me to cut Milton out of my life. But anytime I expressed my deeply felt desire for repair and ongoing right relationship, Michael looked at me askance. I think he perceived it as regressive, as pathological, as anti-feminist even: as an inability to let go and make healthy choices for myself that I needed to be empowered away from.

The double bind is this: we do encourage people, particularly feminine people, to stay in relationships that are dysfunctional or violent. We don't accept that they're allowed to have boundaries. We encourage women and femmes to believe it's possible to single-handedly save violent men, and that it's their individual responsibility to do so. We uphold facile myths about what it means to transform harm through love, but we eschew collective responsibility for such transformations. At the same time, we blame people in harmful situations for not leaving. We pathologise wanting to stay in right relationship, we pay no attention to the material circumstances that inform such decisions, and we leave no room for nuance. For all my white middle-class privilege, money severely limited my

options: I could not and cannot afford to move out and live on my own. Trying to navigate this while you're in the midst of it makes for an enormous clusterfuck.

There was so much behind Michael's suspicion, behind our collective suspicion of the idea that we can stay connected through conflict and get to the other side: the carceral logic of disposability, the myths of toxic monogamy, gender-infused shaming based on the idea of codependency. When I was trapped within that logic, I felt like I couldn't breathe. I don't mean to single out poor Michael: I remember our conversations vividly, but in truth this kind of response is widespread. I got it from other friends, from apolitical therapists, from hegemonic culture as a whole. Behind it was an understanding of repair based on a Beauty and the Beast myth that bears no resemblance to the project of transformative justice. When I gestured towards the latter, everyone assumed I was trapped within the former. I felt undermined. I felt my imagination recede. I felt a narrowing of my possibilities. I felt that all my hope was being snuffed out by a world where there was no conception of what any of this might mean.

I've spent a lot of time grappling with the gendered aspects of this double bind. I've struggled with simultaneously conforming to and deviating from what's generally perceived as stereotypical femininity. And then I found femme, and I was finally able to breathe. Femme was a paradigm shift. I could write a whole other zine about how I arrived at it, and I hope someday I will. The history of femme, of queer femininity, has allowed me to be at home in my tenderness without worrying I'm upholding gender essentialism or leaving parts of myself out of the picture. I've long since known that I have an edge, and a limited tolerance for bullshit. But in hegemonic straight white femininity, it was either/or. To whatever extent this paradigm did allow women to have an edge, it rooted it in ruthless individualism, in capitalist modes of behaviour, in simplistic notions of "strength". The only permissible poles were either a narrow model of corporate independence or compulsory caregiving, ideally within the sphere of the nuclear family. They both meant remaining what Gail Lewis calls "good gendered subjects, in the image of white femininity".

When I first read *The Persistent Desire* a few years back, I laughed out loud when I got to Arlene Istar's essay "Femme-Dyke". She writes, "A friend of mine who truly loves femmes describes femmes as soft, pretty [sic] women who will break a bottle over your head if you cross them". I've broken many a metaphorical bottle

over many heads. Femme has, as Joan Nestle says, “smatterings of a created gender and smatterings of queer”. It’s not interested in policing the borders of femininity, as Minnie Bruce Pratt puts in *S/he*. When I call the way I move through the world femme praxis, I’m not claiming care work just for myself and for people whose gender expression resembles my own. I’m not jealously guarding it, but delighting in what has turned out to be its most comfortable expression for me. Femme is something I’ve built intentionally, with the parts of myself I wanted to grow into. Femme praxis shares common terrain with tender masculinities, with non-binary softness, with radical trans politics, with the infinite landscapes in-between. This sharing is solidarity and community: it’s a source of gladness and emboldenment and joy.

As I write the first draft of this final essay, I have gone back to work. I’m back to leaving the house every day of the week, for the same job I had before lockdown. It’s made a big difference in my life, and not for the better. The contrast has been illuminating. Once again, I’m aware that I’m writing from a position of privilege. The fact that my job is still there puts me in a better place than most. Whiteness and class privilege continue to shape my life. I work 37 hours a week, in a public sector job that I find meaningful and where I don’t feel degraded. I like my colleagues. This job has been a source of connection, of belonging, even of joy. I’ve learned useful skills, have gained confidence, have felt valued, have been transformed. It’s been a part of my becoming.

Even so, the elements of surveillance and coercion inherent to even a gentle workplace have had their effect on me. In truth it doesn’t much matter whether my workplace is gentle: “We often experience and imagine the employment relation”, writes Kathi Weeks in *The Problem With Work*, “—like the marriage relation—not as a social institution but as a unique relationship”. But the issue is structural, political, deeply widespread. I’ve been drained by the relentlessness of work. I don’t know what it’s like to live with the profound weariness of working two or three jobs for 80+ hours a week, but what exhaustion I do know is already too much. A five day work week is too much; it doesn’t leave me enough time for living, enough space or emotional energy to engage with the world. This feeling is a site of solidarity with those on the receiving end of the worst excesses of capitalist violence.

The other day Clementine Morrigan wrote on their Instagram that “the alienation of capitalism creates insecure attachment. (...) Capitalism isolates us and teaches us to fear and compete with each other. Insecure attachment and alienation under capitalism are connected”. I’ve been thinking about this a lot since I went back to work. Capitalism is depleting. It pushes us towards an artificial sense of urgency, a perpetual sense of scarcity, a constant state of time poverty. There’s no overstating how much this worsens my life. The world is abundant, but capitalism steals away the time I get to spend enjoying its riches. It limits my opportunities for building meaning and for finding joy.

In one of my favourite poems, Karen Brodine writes:

It’s like being sick all the time, I think, coming home from work,
sick in that low-grade continuous way that makes you forget
what it’s like to be well. We have never in our lives known
what it is to be well. What if I were coming home, I think,
from doing work that I loved and that was for us all, what
if I looked at the houses and the air and the streets, knowing
they were in accord, not set against us, what if we knew the powers
of this country moved to provide for us and for all people—
how would that be—how would we feel and think
and what would we create?

It feels strange to write this when so many people died, but the pandemic gave me a glimpse of what this would be like. Work receded enough that suddenly I had the space to be. I could imagine a world where we had “the freedom to design, within obvious bonds, our own lives” (Kathy Weeks again). In the work I was redeployed to do from home, the rules of business as normal were temporarily overturned. I was supporting some of the people made the most vulnerable by COVID-19, and the service provision model I was operating within was destabilised just enough that, for a little while, we were able to send our fellow human beings free boxes of food with no questions asked. There was no need for them to jump through hoops to prove they were on the right side of a hierarchy of deservingness. It wasn’t mutual aid, but in those chaotic first few weeks we did have what Josie Sparrow calls “the ability to respond quickly and care-fully to suffering”, with “no

passports checked, no means tested". It felt good to be able to do that; it was a little like being in accord. It made me think we could live like this all the time. I think this zine is my answer to what I would create. It's maybe even my answer to what I would feel and think, to who I would become.

I've written a lot so far about loneliness and attachment anxiety, about turning to the world at large and not just to individual relationships as sources of grounding and belonging. I've written about how I want to do this not so I can lessen the importance of individual ties, but so I can remind myself of the many ways in which we belong to and with one another. For the past few weeks I've been thinking about this a little differently. Full-time work under capitalism means a dearth of things that bring me joy and meaning, of things that nurture and sustain me. Perhaps this scarcity encourages me to put too much stock on individual relationships: they become an easy fix for my alienation from the wider world. It's easier to be corralled towards the normative when you're exhausted all the time. It's easier to zoom in on what's foregrounded as a source of joy and meaning, which is often so-called romantic love.

Time away from work, Weeks says, means "more time to partake of existing possibilities for meaning and fulfilment, and time to invent new ones". When I'm depleted by work, it's hard to even see the existing possibilities, let alone engage in the deeply creative work of inventing new ones. The pandemic created an opportunity for relief, for experimenting with being otherwise. Shorter work hours, says Weeks quoting Valerie Lehr, allow us "the time to reinvent our lives, to reimagine and redefine the spaces, practices, and relationships of nonwork time". I did so much reimagining this past spring, so much discovering. Going back to work has cut it all short.

The other day, in my Pleasure Activism group, Bea shared a Kai Cheng Thom post about "The Deep Story" that got us all talking about our desire to be seen. Some of us said we do feel that "deep-seated need" to be known. We talked about how easy it is for that feeling to be channelled into a desire for a monogamous partnership when this is presented to us as the only way to fulfil it. I talked about my longing for people who know my history, who have the full context of who I am. Hazel said that building this seen-ness into friendships and across a distributed network seems much more stable and sustainable. It was the sort of brief interaction that I find life-giving. It means so much to me that we're all here, in this

current moment, exploring these ideas together and thinking through how they might manifest in our lives.

I've been thinking a lot about my desire to have the context of my life be intelligible and knowable, about how I experience belonging, about all the different ways I get that feeling. I get it from deep friendships. I get it from history; from reading and writing; from joining politicised care circles and study groups. The process of creating this zine has highlighted how much writing in particular is a part of the picture for me. For all the persuading it took for me to get started, now I can't imagine not writing. It comes down to David Wojnarowicz again: "To place an object or writing that contains what is invisible because of legislation or social taboo into an environment outside myself makes me feel not so alone". These words have heartened me when I felt discouraged, be it about writing or about life.

In her introduction to *History Workshop's* excellent series on radical friendship, Laura C. Forster writes, "There is courage to be gleaned from the study of past lives lived with tenderness and honesty". In these past few months of immersing myself in queer and radical history, I have indeed found this courage. The world has opened wide. I've found myself thinking about Rick Bébout, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Rivera much like one would think about beloved friends. I've delighted in this widening of my circle of care across the borders of space and time. I still feel I'd like to have more in the way of distributed dependencies: I don't think I have those five sturdy bonds, that reliably deep social field. For most of my life I've had a sense of scarcity around love and belonging, which means fact and perception are too entangled for me: I can't always quite tell what's true. But sometimes lately, when I feel of the world and in the world, the picture begins to shift. I want to remember the feeling I had during lockdown, in this spring and summer of global uprisings: that my inner life was in synch with the zeitgeist, that I was implicated in the world. When I join conversations about abolition, about building communities of care, I feel that I'm not separate. This dream, this longing for another world: this is our fight.

The path that led me here has not always been pretty. Up until fairly recently, the word "boundaries" used to scare me. I grew up in that too-small crowded room, where there was too much closeness and nothing in the way of real intimacy. Intimacy requires breathing space, and I was allowed none. Bad things happened, ugly things, the stuff of trauma. There was an elision of boundaries combined with

a feeling of being utterly alone. My fears are rooted in that. The past few years have been a crash course in what Adrienne Rich's "loving with all my intelligence" could look like in practice. I think I took it in, even if I didn't always succeed. I learned about loving without dehumanising my beloveds, without requiring them to be the same as me. I learned that loving intelligently is an exercise in restraint, which is not the same as withholding. I learned about attunement and how it's a constant balancing act. I used to think that real intimacy was having no filter, but you can't be mindful of another human being and not have a filter. Boundaries allow for reciprocity. Boundaries are love made safe. I didn't learn this as a child; it's taken me years of painstaking work to be able to write the above and really feel that it's true.

In *Anxiously Attached*, Linda Cundy introduces readers to the concept of "coercive learned helplessness". Like all trauma responses and attachment wounds, she tells us, this is an adaptive survival strategy gone awry:

Anxious and inconsistent mothering makes children afraid to explore the world. They grow up needing other people to help them manage many aspects of their lives, and yet they also expect other people to be inconsistent and let them down. If we cannot guarantee that there is somebody always by our side as we negotiate life, we can at least ensure that there is always someone occupying every corner of our internal world.

In the more passive manifestation of preoccupied attachment, a child will deploy a uniform helplessness, which hides her aggression completely. This exaggerated fearfulness is also known as compulsive care-seeking; we see the harm it does in clients whose lives are defined in terms of problems requiring assistance. Clearly, the "choice" of strategy is made in response to existing family dynamics because the child is adaptive and will evolve the strategy that gets best results—that is, maximum access and proximity to the caregiver.

Cundy also draws a distinction between rackety or display feelings and the authentic feelings they're trying to mask. Reading this was a revelation: I suddenly understood so much more about how I've been diminished by love. When I feel a desire for deep intimacy, my tendency is to present a shrunk version of myself that

is, paradoxically, louder and more demanding than my authentic self. I become adept at misdirection. I engage in protest behaviour. I show up with my worst foot forward.

I did this a lot with my estranged friend, especially while things were unravelling with Milton. There was so much going on, and it's all so hard to untangle. I was genuinely isolated while going through a hard and painful thing, and I genuinely needed support. I lacked a network of distributed dependencies, a deep social field, a reliable group of people I could have conversations with that wouldn't inevitably end in frustration like my conversations with Michael. I needed more close friends, perhaps more so than at any other point in my life. All of these things are true. But it's equally true that I leaned into my fragility when I craved connection, because I didn't believe my friend could possibly want to spend time with me otherwise. An emergency of sorts was always required.

This felt off-kilter to her, because it was. Over time it began to feel coercive, because it was that, too. None of it was clear to me at the time, but there was a sense of wrongness underneath the reach of my intellectual understanding. The perverse thing about this strategy is that even in moments when reaching out from a place of helplessness was successful, even when she responded with warmth and care, it didn't result in a feeling of genuine intimacy. Again, all that care went through me as though my heart were a sieve. Deep down I knew I wasn't bringing my full self to the table. Something was off. It didn't feel good for either of us.

Towards the end of the visit where we went to see Eileen Myles, my friend and I travelled to the Olympic Peninsula for our final weekend together. The landscape moved me deeply: I knew it from Sarah McCarry's books, especially *About a Girl*, which I'd reread at my friend's house earlier that week. But to be there was something else altogether: I was awed by the vast expanses of temperate rainforest; the sight of the Pacific; my first time ever seeing kelp at the beach. I came from so far away: how unlikely that I was there at all, that I got to see with my own eyes. I'd been reading *The Rejectionist* for years, not realising then that Sarah McCarry's writing was a source of intense relief because it was rooted in a queer sensibility. She often wrote about the complications of feeling that her heart belonged so deeply to that landscape—to a place where her presence as a white person evoked an ongoing history of genocide and displacement. I thought about that too as my friend and I drove through roads lined by evergreens, with

occasional glimpses of mountains and lakes that took my breath away. The landscape gave me a feeling I couldn't and still can't fully articulate, a feeling I had before in Alentejo and North Wales: so much beauty, so entangled with pain.

My heart was not okay. It was October, and it rained for most of the weekend. On Saturday evening, a little while after we'd come back to our room from the day's outing, my friend told me she wanted to take a nap. We'd spent the whole day together. We'd walked among conifers in the largest temperate rainforest ecoregion in the world. We'd just been cuddling in bed, reading Meg-John Barker's zine "What Does a Queer Relationship Look Like?" together, and had a full night and day ahead of us still. That afternoon I'd seen a pumpkin patch for the first time; it looked like something out of Ray Bradbury. There was so much that could have filled my heart. My friend didn't ask me to leave—all she did was tell me she wanted to go to sleep for a little while, in bed with me, in my arms. And yet I didn't let her sleep. I fidgeted, I tried to draw her attention; I woke her up every two minutes with attempts to interact until she finally gave up. I'd been feeling tragically abandoned. I could not calm down. I wanted her attention all the time.

It would be easy, in some contexts, to find support for a version of this story where I paint myself as reasonably and righteously wounded and my friend as cold and withholding. I could emphasise the long-distance nature of our relationship, the fact that it was our last weekend together for who knew how long, the humanity of my need for comfort from her. But those feelings, while human, were not righteous or sacrosanct. What I did was not easy on my friend, and it was not fair. Just like before, it dehumanised her. She deserved better; she'd already given me so much. Telling me she was tired and needed a nap was again an act of trust, and again I failed to honour it.

I caused even greater harm with Milton when I was younger. One evening, after we'd moved in together, I asked him to pick up some spaghetti on his way home from work. For whatever reason—I can't remember the details—he got linguini instead. I blew it entirely out of proportion: I sulked, I walked back to the Co-op myself, I delayed dinner and derailed our evening. It was especially ugly and wasteful because unlike what'd happened when my friend wanted to take a nap, my reaction didn't come from a place of deep embodied distress. It was simply born out of habit; this kind of thing was what my mother used to do. I didn't know what it was like to live without conflict, without ongoing belligerence. I had never learned.

I didn't realise that, as Sarah Schulman writes, how we treat one another is part of a wider project: it's part of our small contribution to peace.

These memories loomed large in my mind in the years that followed: too large at times, unhelpfully large. I couldn't bear to remember how I'd behaved with Milton, how I'd behaved with my friend. Whenever I tried to face it, I dissolved into tears. My distress left me stuck: it was too intense, and it got in the way of the work I needed to do.

A few weeks after that October trip, I went to the London Anarchist Book Fair with Emma. I remember that a copy of *The Revolution Starts at Home* caught my eye. I wish I'd bought it, wish I could have found my way to transformative justice sooner and could have started to climb my way out. I was caught in a shame spiral. It made me either hyper- or underaccountable, with no generative middle ground. It didn't help that the predominant cultural message is that everybody has this shit figured out; if we don't we're hopeless, bad, damaged beyond repair. It isn't true. In reality there's a widespread lack of skills around boundaries and accountability, a lack that's profoundly social, cultural, political. There's a deep need to talk about this explicitly and build up these skills. As Dean Spade says in *Rebel Steps*:

I mean we live in a prison culture, right? We live in a culture that's premised on the idea of like being good or bad and exiling bad people. So we're all terrified of being bad people. We want to prove that we're exclusively good people. That entire thing is a set up of immense pressure where it's the opposite of accountability. We're afraid to ever admit our mistakes and we're really afraid to say to somebody else "what you did just didn't work for me or that hurt my feelings or I'm worried that's not the right thing for us." So we're really bad at feedback because we live in a culture where if we gave and received actually good feedback, we'd have accountability instead of like a culture of terror and of like extremes of you know imaginary good and bad. So all of us like need these skills.

Before transformative justice, I genuinely believed my history put me beyond the pale. I remember thinking, as recently as two years ago, that the harm I'd caused in my relationships meant that no one who was a genuinely good person could possibly allow me to stay in their life if they knew the truth, let alone actively want

to be close to me. If somebody trusted me, surely that made them untrustworthy. I felt that I had to hide, but hiding made intimacy impossible. It pre-empted the exile I felt sure was coming: it was only a matter of time.

At the start of the pandemic, during my *Riverdale* days of deep shame, I talked to my friend Marian nearly every day. She carried me through moments when I felt like the lowest of the low. We talked about how we were both drawn to the *Riverdale* storyline about Betty's obsession with having the "serial killer gene". Even though it relied on an essentialised understanding of harm that I knew was bullshit, I felt it said something about me. It certainly said something about trauma and the shame it engenders.

I'd internalised my rupture with my estranged friend. In my grief, I became unable to see what had happened between us as a complex sequence of events involving the unique dynamics, histories and wounds of two human beings. I wanted a simple story, and so I defaulted to believing I was bad, beyond redemption, unworthy of love or belonging anywhere. "If it's my fault, if there's something wrong with me", Clementine Morrigan writes in *Love Without Emergency*, "then maybe I can fix it".

In my talks with Marian I said hyperbolic things about not being fit for human company. In one conversation, I compared myself to Harvey Weinstein. I was stuck in the overaccountability pole of that unhelpful binary. Marian's patience and care were a lifeline. I let her empathy in. I was desperate for a way out. I read *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*. Between our talks and the book, something inside me began to shift. I read "Vent Diagrams as Healing Practice" by Elisabeth Long and felt so much hope. I didn't know how common what I was feeling was. It had felt entirely unique, which was the separation of shame.

In *Conflict is Not Abuse*, Sarah Schulman writes:

But for many, shame-based hiding is often imposed from within. They want to conceal their experience because they don't understand that it is widely shared. There is a narcissism in trauma-based shame: a belief that one is special and different and that others can't possibly feel the same way, understand, or need understanding.

I shy away from the word “narcissism” much like I shy away from “codependent”: I feel it’s overused, and that it has a hard edge I’d rather steer clear of. But in fact there’s a deep kindness to what Schulman is saying: a deep belief in our capacity for change, an overwhelming sense of hope. This hope is the beating heart of abolition. As Ayana Young says to Mariame Kaba in *For the Wild*, “abolition is the antithesis to fatalism”.

I carried on reading. I read “Facing Shame” by Nathan Share. I read “How We Learned (Are Learning) Transformative Justice” by adrienne maree brown:

When we define ourselves, the result is complexity. We are none of us one thing, neither good nor bad. We are complex surviving organisms. We do appalling things to each other, rooted in trauma. We survive, we learn, we have agency about our next steps. We rise to great kindness, great bravery, rooted in lineage and dream.

My grief didn’t exactly recede, but it became more proportional. I started to think about how the principles of transformative justice might apply to my life. The arc of my history became more intelligible. Transformative justice was the first thing that ever made sense, the first thing that allowed me to make sense of both the harm I grew up with and the harm I’d perpetuated. I understood how harm had crept into my patterns of relating, into the dynamics I developed with people whose hearts and values I trusted and still trust. I saw that the work ahead was to transform the conditions that allowed for harm and rupture to happen, so that they might not happen again.

The conditions were ones of profound isolation. When things turned ugly with Milton, when we grew mutually resentful and acted unkindly towards each other, I needed a community of people with the skills and the resources to intervene. I needed reality checks; needed reminders of the true proportion of our conflicts; needed to be talked down from my despair. I needed the deep context of ongoing close friendship. I needed wide open windows looking out into the world, so that I didn’t think the harm I was experiencing was all there was to my life.

Because I didn’t have this, things were far messier for far longer than they would have been otherwise. The friends I loved dearly and who were witnessing the harm were not equipped to intervene, in part because they were living (we were

living) atomised lives under capitalism. This is not their fault, and I genuinely believe it also comes at their expense. Part of it was also a matter of sheer numbers: I didn't have relationships of depth with enough people to be able to distribute my dependencies sustainably. These structures needed to have been in place before the harm occurred. When I started reading about what a vision of community accountability under abolition looks like, I understood that this was it. These were the things that could have offered me a way out.

During lockdown I read *The Color of Violence*; Emi Koyama writes, in an essay titled "Disloyal to Feminism",

Friends Are Reaching Out" (F.A.R. Out) is a particularly inspiring program model from Northwest Network. Initially designed for communities of queer people of color, this "radical organizing project to strengthen friendships and build accountability in our relationships with each other" facilitates intentional dialogues about relationship abuse among close friends. This approach is based on participants' shared commitment to staying connected to each other, while building the capacity of friendship networks to resist isolation, and hold each other accountable.

The basic assumption of the F.A.R. Out program is that even though we may love and care for our friends, we are unreliable to each other in the face of abuse unless we work in advance on building the capacity to respond. In addition to clarifying our expectations for what roles friends should play when one is in a troubling relationship so as to "take the guesswork out of how to support your friend when they're in need," the strategy of staying connected may prevent relationship abuse because "isolation from friends and family is the most common tactic used by abusers in establishing control patterns."

I'm so moved by this vision. Harm thrives in silence; I've always known that. When I was little my parents used to urge me to never tell anyone about anything that happened in our house. One time I got in trouble because when our back terrace flooded on a day of heavy rainfall, I called our next-door neighbour, whose son I'd started playing with after school, and told her all about it. My parents went

out of their way to discourage this bond; eventually they succeeded. Their attitude was less deliberately sinister than it likely sounds. It's true that our isolation gave them a measure of control they wouldn't have been able to maintain otherwise, but what was also at stake was their straight white middle-class sense of propriety, of respectability. To air out our troubles would have been uncouth. In practice, no matter the motivation, the result was the same. It diminished their lives, too: I saw that with my own eyes.

My queerness is a very intentional rejection of this. When I read Koyama's description I thought, here's another way to live. Here's a direct challenge to the idea that to bring community into our private lives shows a lack of decorum. Here's the link between the too-small room of my youth and the queer adult I am today, the person I want to become. I also appreciate how this vision leaves room for understanding that when our friends and communities fail to intervene, it isn't about individual failure or about a lack of care. These are deep political issues. Knowing this allows me to continue to love my friends without feeling like I've been personally let down. We're all in desperate need of upskilling so we can truly show up for each other.

The more I read about transformative justice, the more I realised that my struggles to align my day to day living with my values are more than common—they're absolutely everywhere. They're the messy stuff of human lives dedicated to the pursuit of liberation. We all stumble, fall flat on our faces, get up to try again. We can all hold each other through this process. We can do it together and continue to belong. In a beautiful essay called "Redefining Words to Reimagine Our Reality", Qui Dorian Alexander writes,

Punishment never looks at the root cause of conflict. It only addresses the value of the conflict—you have to "pay for" what you have done. Accountability acknowledges the conditions that caused a person to act in the ways they have. It recognizes the context in which one understands one's own actions and creates a framework for someone to understand and be responsible for the impact of those actions. To believe in TJ, you have to believe in change. You have to believe that people have the capacity to change, while understanding that not everyone will. You have to believe that if we

help people heal from their own hurts, they can recognize how they have taken those hurts out on others. They can start to change their behaviours.

(...)

TJ provides a framework for us to accept that we are still worthy of love and belonging when we do or receive harm. No one is disposable. Oppressive structures cause folks to make harmful decisions and teach us that any harm we've received is our fault. Accountability also cannot be done in a vacuum. It requires connection, trust, and vulnerability. We have to be willing to be seen in our mess.

This zine is me being seen in my mess. It's me taking stock, and making intentional decisions about what I want to keep. I want to keep the vision of deliberate tenderness and care I found in femme. I want to keep my vulnerability, to embrace the fact that I am "as leaky a vessel as ever was made" (Solnit). I want to sit with this even though I'm afraid to leak too much, am still susceptible to the shame of impropriety. I want to "delight in need and want" (Crawley). I want to hold on to the knowledge that this is all deep political work.

I'm profoundly indebted to the work of activists, writers and thinkers like Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mariame Kaba, adrienne maree brown, Tourmaline, Dean Spade, all the other people I have cited in these pages. I want to carry on reading their work, watching their films, joyfully downloading every podcast episode they appear on, keeping company with them, letting them lead me more people and to resources that deepen this work. They're part of a movement that's been saying for years that abolition is a scaling up of interdependence and care. It's all the same project. I want to stay with the knowledge that care is entirely desirable, that being a leaky vessel and needing one another is entirely desirable. They're more than desirable, they're revolutionary. To live like this is to move, bit by bit, towards the queer and abolitionist horizons.

The Critical Resistance statement on "What is the PIC? What is Abolition?" says,

An abolitionist vision means that we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future. It means developing practical strategies for taking small steps that move us toward making our dreams real

and that lead us all to believe that things really could be different. It means living this vision in our daily lives.

I longed for this before I found it, years before I even had the language for it. I looked everywhere for something that would help me make sense of my life. Like bell hooks, I “came to theory because I was hurting—”

...the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.

When I first read *Tiny Beautiful Things* and was floored by Sugar’s loving encouragement to choose to be the most generous version of ourselves, I didn’t know that was my heart craving abolition. When on the overnight flight back home from that October trip to see my friend I read the whole of Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Chronology of Water* and cried and cried at the end, that was about abolition.

The other day in my abolition study group someone used the phrase “interpretative generosity” to describe the approach most of us are more likely to take with loved ones, or even just people we know, when confronted with their patterns of harm. At such times we have a greater capacity to make room for nuance than when we’re thinking in abstracts. As Qui Alexander says, we recognise the context. It’s something certain populations are afforded by default and others are systematically denied. It’s a measure of our vulnerability. It’s a deep human need and a valuable impulse, but it’s also one carceral logic encourages us to shy away from.

Nine times out of ten, my heart craves reconciliation and repair. I want to stay in connection, and even when that’s not possible I almost always want to understand the context, to do the private work of humanising, even if not outright forgiving, those who have caused me hurt. Despite the deep harm of my youth, I’ve kept my parents in my life. This will not be the right decision for everyone, but it’s been right for me. For years I craved an ethical and political framework where this was intelligible, where it was sayable, where it was not simplistically framed as “enabling abusers” or seen as a capitulation and betrayal of other survivors.

Carceral feminism chipped away at my hope because it made this shameful and forbidden. It seemed to want to replace a vision of justice where only wealthy straight white men are consistently offered interpretative generosity with one where we deny it to everyone. What if instead we extended it to the world at large, while still centring survivors of harm and their unique contexts and needs?

A word of generosity, of steadfast care, of unwavering support for true accountability: to live in such a world is the same as Karen Brodine's vision of being in accord. It's Richard Wright's life believing in life. It's Ruth Wilson Gilmore's description of abolition work as "demanding a future that has some sense of the voluptuous beauty life should hold". It's what Dean Spade calls, in a discussion with Nat Raha, the sweetness of mutual aid and community care. I want that sweetness in my life: that tenderness, that deep hope and belief in life. Even just thinking about it grabs hold of my heart. It's a political vision I can bring my whole self to, because it's so deeply tied to how I want to live.

One early morning during this pandemic summer I watched the Antipode Foundation film *Geographies of Racial Capitalism with Ruth Wilson Gilmore*. It was filmed in Lisbon, the city of my birth, and it touches on the history of colonial brutality my early education encouraged me to glorify and whose ramifications we're still living today. In the film's stunning conclusion, Ruth Wilson Gilmore says,

It's a form of solidarity, and it's making solidarity. And solidarity is something that is made and remade and remade, it never just is. And I think of that in terms of radical dependency, that we come absolutely to depend on each other. And so solidarity and this radical dependency that I keep thinking about, that I keep seeing everywhere, is about life, and living, and living together, and living together in rather beautiful ways. (...) And it's possible. It's really possible. And not in a romanticised way, but in a material, deliberate, consciousness-exploding way. It's possible.

I cried when I first heard this, and nearly every time I've reread it since. How could I not?

These are the deepest longings of my heart: I want to keep making connections with no fixed destination, with no endgame in sight. I want to love

without there coming a time when I retreat from the world into privatised couplehood. I want to keep expanding my network of distributed dependencies. I want to love without emergency. I want my rooms to always have wide-open windows. I want to have cats again. I want to develop relationships of creative collaboration, where I experience the deep trust and joy of being edited, of writing with others, of making something I could never make on my own. I want to go for hap walks. I want to sabotage whiteness. I want to live communally. I want to be surrounded by people who do have the skills and the resourced to intervene—to have a pod, as Mia Mingus puts it, and to be a part of other people’s pods. I want to be implicated in other people’s lives. I want to write more letters to incarcerated people, for as long as we continue to put people in cages (Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s “survival pending abolition”). I want to help bring about the end of racial capitalism and of heteropatriarchy, however tiny my part. I want to write more zines. I want to share food, to cook for others. I want more of the deep pleasure of making my coconut butternut squash curry for Adam in New Orleans, for my estranged beloved friend half a world away, even for my parents back home.

I want more of the deep trust I experienced during my brief time in that local grassroots campaign, when facts that could have compromised my life were held safely in the hands of strangers. I want that kind of solidarity. That moment in *Pride* when the miners’ unions show up to lead the 1985 Pride march, or the one in *Crip Camp* when the disability justice activists occupying the federal building at 50 United Nations Plaza call the Black Panthers and they bring them food: I want that. There are few things that move me more, that give me more of a sense of hope and of public joy. I want to make common cause with everyone fighting for liberation. In “Gangs Policing, Deportation, and the Criminalisation of Friendship” Luke de Noronha writes about Darel, a Black man criminalised for “gang membership” and deported after 25 years in the UK, and points out that “the criminalisation of alternative forms of care and social reproduction—of friendship—binds Darel and others like him to radical feminists and queers”—to people like me. I want to never lose sight of the fact that we’re all connected, that we share sites of deep solidarity. I want to act from that understanding and fight as though our lives are all at stake—because they are.

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Feminism of colour taught me that citation is a political act. Regardless of whether or not I reference them directly, this zine wouldn't exist without the following works:

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